

## May the World Turn and Turn Until You Shine

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# May the World Turn and Turn Until You Shine

by [PrettyLittlePoutyMouth](#)

## Summary

With one year of college down, things start to change for everyone. Tori and Jade look to the future while trying to maintain their relationship in the face of isolation and new connections. Sam, Cat, and Carly work out the idiosyncrasies of their relationship while navigating new dynamics with their siblings. Freddie embarks on a path of self-discovery. Things somehow go right for Robbie. Lunacy defines friendship, love, and family.

## Notes

See the end of the work for [notes](#)

# Dew

## July 2014

The summer feels full and rich with experience and with fun, and perhaps for that reason, it seems to be going by way too fast. It's already July, and in the past couple of weeks, they've seen Robbie perform stand-up a few times, they've gone to a bar (where they all had to have their hands stamped) to see Andre open for an up-and-coming band (with Tori's assistance singing harmonies on a song they wrote together), they've filmed all the principle shots for the movie Jade is focusing on this summer (with Freddie as the director of photography). Not to mention, they celebrated Cat's 20th birthday at the end of June, and Sam and Carly threw her a party that still makes her smile to look back on it (though, maybe the part that makes her smile the most is the celebration in the bedroom at the end of the night, after all the guests went home). There have also been parties at Beck's and Tori's, various trips to restaurants and favorite stores all over the city, plus, you know, the work and things everyone has to do to earn money over the break.

And all through this, Carly has been spending most of her time at the apartment with Cat and Sam. Cat loves having her there, and Carly has expressed many times how much nicer it feels to be able to spend her days with them, rather than alone. Cat made room in her closet for some of Carly's clothes, Sam made room in the pantry for some of Carly's food, and it almost feels like she lives with them sometimes. Except, of course, that she *doesn't*, that she still has her own place with most of her stuff, and that there are often snags when it comes to all of them coexisting in a one-bedroom apartment. Sleeping is a big one. They've done the nest on the floor thing a lot, since it gives them all the chance to sleep together, but it's just not that comfortable to sleep on the floor night after night. They'll share the twin beds, with various combinations of people, but someone always ends up left out. Sometimes, too, the twin bed will just feel too damn small in the night, and one of them will end up out on the couch, anyway.

It's an imperfect arrangement, but they're enjoying it.

At the beginning of July, though, Carly states, "You know, I'm supposed to renew my lease in August."

Cat glances over at Sam, wondering if she's having the same thought that immediately came to mind for Cat. Sam squints at Carly. "Do you want to renew it?" she asks.

Carly shrugs. "I don't really know. I mean, it's not like I've been there that much lately. And it's farther away from you two. When school starts back up, that might suck, a lot."

It *would* suck. A lot. Cat still hasn't found time to start learning to drive, and the thought of Carly being so far away during the school year, and Cat not being able to easily go visit her, sounds awful.

The idea of "You should move in with us!" bursts out of Cat before anyone can say anything else.

Sam stares at her, but she's smiling a bit, clearly not opposed. Carly grins, too. "I mean. We've all been thinking about it, right?" she asks.

"I know I have," Sam reveals.

"But I don't think I could move in *here*," Carly gestures around the apartment.

Cat frowns. "Why not?" She knows that the bed thing is an issue, but she figures they can work around that if Carly *actually* moves in.

"It feels like enough space *now*," Sam explains, "But it's gonna start feeling too small when it's the school year and we're all trying to do homework in the living room or whatever."

"Right," Carly nods. "And also," she hesitates, but then continues, "This is really *your* space. The two of you built this *home* together, it has furniture and decorations that mean something to you. I'd just be...trying to squeeze in somewhere that isn't *for* me."

Cat *loves* this apartment, but in a way, she realizes that this fact alone confirms exactly what Carly is saying: it's *Cat's* home, in a way it can never quite be Carly's. Hell, they still refer to the bathroom Carly typically uses as the "guest bathroom," despite the fact that Carly is an almost constant guest...and there's that word again.

Yeah. Carly has a good point. And really, so does Sam.

"But we just re-signed our lease in May," Cat reminds Sam.

Carly looks a little disappointed, "Oh. Well...maybe I could just find a closer apartment of my own?" she suggests.

"Nah, wait a minute," Sam says. "We can make this work. What if we just sublet our place until the lease is up? Then we can move in all together somewhere else, somewhere we can start from scratch and Carly can have a hand in decorating, too." She grins. "I bet Dice can find someone to sublet in a heartbeat."

He probably could. It's definitely in his skill set. "We have to figure it out fast," Cat says.

"Ah, don't worry. We've got this," Sam answers dismissively.

Despite Sam's assurance, it ends up being Cat and Carly who really figure out the details of their move. They end up choosing a two-bedroom apartment in the same complex, reasoning that the extra bedroom is similar to the personal space in Carly's studio apartment and because the cost is close to their current two rents combined, so they feel confident their parents will help pay for the unit.

But Sam does come through on one end: Dice finds them a subletter very quickly. It turns out that Rita Rooney, the MMA fighter that Sam knocked out that one time, is looking for a place large enough for her to have a home gym. She comes to see the apartment again, since she's only been there one time, and decides very quickly that she definitely wants to sublet.

So, it's settled. They're moving in together next month.

## August 2014

“Tell me again why we agreed to this,” Jade asks through gritted teeth. “I should’ve asked for my birthday present to be that I *don’t* have to help our friends move.”

“But you *didn’t*, and they got you a nice new lens for your camera instead,” Tori answers patiently. “Besides. We agreed to help because these are our friends and we love them.”

Jade glares at her like Tori has just insulted her entire body of filmography. “That’s disgusting. I do *not* lo—”

“Oh, hey, let me take the other end of that,” Carly says. Jade gratefully relinquishes the other end of the extra large box labeled *Sam personal* (yeah, Tori doesn’t really want to know) to allow Tori and Carly to carry it together.

“It’s pretty heavy,” Tori says conversationally as Carly hefts it to adjust her grip. Though the two werewolves are able to carry it without the apparent effort it was costing Jade. This just makes Jade look even more sour as she scowls and follows along behind them, clearly not keen to go back and grab another box by herself.

“Sam doesn’t really think about other people having to carry it when she packs a box,” Carly explains.

Yeah, that...sounds about right. They carry the box into the new apartment. It’s in the same complex, but it’s just far enough away from the old apartment that it’s almost too far to walk, though putting boxes in the car and driving them across the complex wouldn’t be much easier (though, they all do end up doing this at the end of the day, when they’re just tired and over it).

“Sam,” Carly says in a mildly scolding tone as they come in with the giant box. “You need to come back over and help us carry these giant boxes you packed full of too much stuff.”

“But I’m overseeing things here,” Sam insists from where she’s sitting on the couch.

Carly shoots her a look about as sour as Jade’s, and Cat steps in; she follows them inside, carrying a much lighter box of stuffed animals and offers cheerfully, “I’ll oversee for a while! That way I can put out some snacks and drinks for everyone.”

It seems that food is, once again, the key to getting Sam to do what everyone else wants, and she reluctantly agrees and gets off the couch to head back to the old apartment and start carrying more heavy boxes over. Jade mumbles something about seeing if Cat might need some help, but Tori grabs her wrist and drags her along. If Tori’s going to earn these snacks with her sweat, then so is Jade. Even if she’ll never admit to sweating.

Despite how miserable it is to move an apartments’ worth of stuff on a hot summer day (though she’s glad they maybe have it a little easier than the guys; they’re climbing stairs to clear out boxes from Carly’s studio apartment, and Dice and Goomer are responsible for

selling some of the triad's unwanted furniture out of a rented truck, and then all guys are supposed to go pick up new furniture from Wanko's), Tori also recognizes how sweet and *exciting* this occasion is. She and Jade had been so certain that Sam and Cat's initial open relationship would not work, and had both still been pretty skeptical when Carly began dating *both* Sam and Cat, but things have been going so well that they're all actually moving in together. Tori might be more worried if not for the fact that Sam and Cat have just *always* lived together, so she figures they know what they're doing when it comes to living with a partner. And now with two.

It makes her think longingly about living with Jade.

They really haven't talked about it. Mostly because it just seems like such a far off possibility right now. Living at home still works for both of them right now; they don't have to pay rent, their parents consistently keep food in the house, any money they earn can basically go to fun stuff, they don't have to juggle school and full-time jobs. And, with Trina still often out of the house, and with Jade's bedroom in the basement, they both have a reasonable amount of privacy for...all the things they do that are private.

Tori reflects that they're lucky to be able to live at home while attending school, that most of their friends still live at home with their parents. The reason Sam, Cat, and Carly *don't* is because their parents aren't local (or, in the case of Sam, her parent isn't someone she should be living with, anyway). Would it be nice to have parents who would pay for Tori and Jade to have their own apartment? Sure, of course it would. But it's also nice to have parents who are present in their lives, as hands-off as Tori's parents can be, and as much as Jade complains about her mom, Tori knows she actually appreciates her.

She brings this up as she and Jade walk side by side, both carrying smaller boxes of dishes and cups from the kitchen, padded with towels and clothes. "Do you think we'll ever move in together?"

"No, Tori," Jade growls. "I intend to maintain a separate residence well into my 90s."

Tori rolls her eyes. "Okay, you know what I mean."

Jade doesn't reply for a moment, then finally says, "I sure hope so."

"Yeah. Me, too," Tori sighs. "I know it makes sense to keep living at home during college, but watching our friends, I keep thinking about how we might decorate an apartment, and what kind of furniture we might get, and—"

"I don't know if I know how to live with someone else," Jade interrupts abruptly.

Tori glances at her. "What do you mean?"

"I thought that was pretty clear," Jade scowls.

"Well, it's not like you live alone right *now*," Tori says reasonably.

“Yeah, but it’s not like I live *closely* with anyone. My mom and I have more or less been like roommates since my dad left. I come and go as I please, and downstairs in my room, I can manage days without running into her. And my brother is too young and too boring to really be that interested in anything I do. Plus, he has a healthy fear of me that keeps him from going into my room.”

“I mean...I’ve had to share a bathroom with Trina,” Tori begins, and Jade shudders just at the mention of it. “But otherwise, you know how my parents are. They’ve been treating me as an adult since I was about twelve.”

“So what do you think will happen when the two of us, who are both *strongly* independent and have *very* specific ideas on how things are supposed to be, try to live together?” Jade asks skeptically.

“I don’t know,” Tori frowns. “We won’t know until we try!” she adds optimistically.

“Yeah, it’s the ‘trying’ part I’m worried about,” Jade scoffs.

“I guess, like anything, we’ll have to talk about it.”

“Maybe it’s a good thing we still have a couple more years to grow up before we start making each other miserable on a daily basis.”

“Aww, I’m so glad we have that to look forward to,” Tori coos, nudging Jade with her elbow.

“Don’t bump me while I’m carrying dishes!” Jade yells.

“Geez, sorry.”

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They finish moving by mid-afternoon, including everything from Carly’s apartment and their new furniture, and order a bunch of pizza to celebrate and feed all their friends. Afterwards, everyone leaves pretty quickly, probably to go shower. And because an apartment full of boxes and randomly placed furniture isn’t a great location for a party.

When she and Cat had chosen this apartment, they’d discussed the idea of Sam and Cat continuing to share one of the bedrooms, and Carly using the second one. Though, they also all agreed they wanted a bigger bed they could all share. The plan had been to put the big bed in the master bedroom, which would also have all of Sam and Cat’s other furniture and decorations, leaving Carly with a room for her own things.

They’d just kind of underestimated how *big* the king size bed actually *is*.

Just the mattress, which Goomer, Dice, and Andre had wrangled into the master bedroom, gives all three of them pause. The master bedroom is smaller than the one in Sam and Cat’s old apartment, something none of them had considered. But then, Carly realizes, the old apartment can’t be standard; it’s one bedroom and two bathrooms. There almost *had* to be a second bedroom at one point that was turned into part of the master bedroom or the living room or both.

“Okay, so...” Carly starts, as they all stare at the mattress among the boxes and the long packaging containing the bedframe they still have to assemble. “Where do we want to put this?”

“How is it going to take up, like, the whole room?” Sam grumbles.

It’s not just the size of the bed, it’s the shape of the room, the placement of the doors to the hall and to the bathroom, and the closet. With the bed, and any bedside tables they might fit alongside it, there isn’t much wall space left for dressers or desks or anything else that might belong in a bedroom.

“Maybe we just have one room for sleeping?” Cat suggests. “That might make sense, anyway, if it’s the room we’re all going to be in a lot, maybe it makes sense that it’s just for that.”

Carly feels a bit crestfallen. The whole purpose of moving into an apartment this size is so that she keeps some space to herself. Sam and Cat are used to sharing space. Carly...isn’t really used to sharing space with *anyone*. The tiny flat in Italy she’d shared with her father had been occasionally challenging, but...her dad wasn’t actually home enough for it to get stressful. Otherwise, she basically had a floor to herself when she lived with Spencer in Seattle, and a studio apartment to herself in Los Angeles.

She’s already worried about feeling crowded in her own home.

But at the same time, she can’t find a better solution than what Cat proposes. Unless they want to return the king-sized bed and get two smaller beds and then Carly would just sleep alone in her own room and she *doesn’t* want *that*. Despite still wanting her own space, part of the point of moving in with her girlfriends is to increase intimacy. She won’t have that if she keeps herself *too* separate.

“Okay, but the master bathroom is in here,” Carly points out. “So whoever wakes up first in the morning would wake everyone else up taking a shower and everything.”

Sam shrugs. “I’m used to that.”

But Cat seems to sympathize with Carly, “Then maybe the bed should go into the second bedroom. That way, that room is just for sleeping, and then this room is for showering and dressing and fun stuff!”

It’s not ideal, but it’s the agreement they can come to. One room for sleeping, one room for getting dressed, and a common room.

Carly refuses to consider that this might be a mistake.

As they spend the next couple of days putting together furniture and unpacking boxes, she starts to feel a little better. Because of the shape of the second bedroom, the bed actually fits in a way that makes a little more sense, leaving enough wall space for Carly’s small desk. She at least has a semi-private spot to go to if she needs to concentrate on homework or something. The master bedroom has their dressers, Cat’s desk, a TV, some additional chairs.



The living room has most of Sam and Cat's old furniture from the set of *That's a Drag*; most of Carly's old furniture wasn't nice or sentimental enough for her to want to keep.

When it comes time to decorate, though, there's another snag. Because Sam and Cat already have *a lot* of decorations. Not everything made it from their old apartment (Carly and Cat had managed to convince Sam to throw away the urinal she had mounted on the wall over her bed for some baffling reason), but there's still...*a lot*.

Carly expresses that she wants to have a hand in decorating, too, and Sam and Cat look eager, wondering what she has to offer. And the truth is, Carly *doesn't* really have anything to offer. Not yet. She *wants* to, she knows she wants to order a "Bigfoot Crossing" street sign, a Cuddlefish poster much like one she used to have when she was younger. But beyond that... she's still figuring out what she likes. The bedroom she had in Seattle, the one she really thinks about as *hers* even if it was only for the last couple of years she lived there, had been designed by Spencer and her friends. And she never really decorated her studio apartment across town.

Maybe because it never really felt like home.

"I don't have much yet," Carly admits. "All I have is the one sculpture Spencer gave me."

Spencer had gone back to Seattle in the middle of July, though Freddie is still staying in the sublet until he goes back to Stanford at the end of the month. His sculpture had been very well-received by Hollywood Arts, and he'd enjoyed his time in Los Angeles. Before he left, he'd presented Carly with a sculpture to thank her for allowing him to be a werewolf with her friends while he was visiting.

Like most of Spencer's work, it's pretty big. But it is at least flat enough that it could be mounted in a wall. Spencer had taken a surfboard, and a bunch of Los Angeles themed keychains and magnets and other touristy pieces of plastic and had managed to create the image of a wolf on the board out of the pieces.

"The sculpture is *awesome*," Sam gushes. "We'll definitely put that up."

"Why don't we leave some areas open for Carly to decorate?" Cat suggests, "Once she decides what she wants to put up?"

It's a nice offer, and Carly accepts it, but now she feels the struggle of needing to decide... what *is* her aesthetic, and how is it going to mesh with Sam's and Cat's? The two of them are already a contrast, a study in opposites. What is Carly?

Sometimes, she feels very...*boring*. Basic. Maybe she just doesn't have enough imagination to decorate a room, or an apartment.

But it's time to build a home, and Carly vows to do her part to make her mark to show that she belongs here, with her girlfriends, in their unconventional family unit.

About a week after they get the apartment into some semblance of order (and subsequently can actually *leave* it to go hang out with friends again) is the full moon. The first night of the full moon is a Friday, and Freddie is hosting a party in the sublet he's still staying in, the one Spencer paid for through the summer, even though he already went back to Seattle. They decide to make it a wolfsbane night and all go, and have their Shadow Creek Park excursion on Sunday.

Freddie's party feels *extra* fun, maybe because it's a new location, maybe because Sam is amped on wolfsbane, maybe because she, Cat, and Carly all had great sex before they left. Or maybe because Spencer left a bunch of sculpture materials behind that Freddie hasn't gotten rid of yet. He claims he doesn't want to throw them out and is trying to figure out how much of the stuff can be recycled (it's all sorts of refuse, from old electronics to glass to seashells to cardboard). Sam suspects that Freddie just doesn't feel like cleaning up someone else's mess. She doesn't blame him.

But the sculpture materials turn out to become Sam's focus during the party, as she starts playing with them and putting together her own mini sculptures (she has no intention of tackling something the size of Spencer's usual sculptures, both because it's too time-consuming and because she doubts anything large she makes would be able to stand up on its own). She's enjoying the process of turning trash into something fun while all around her, her friends talk and laugh and drink (it's her night to be designated driver, which is fine, because she feels wild enough just on wolfsbane).

"These are pretty good," Carly tells her. She's drunk, a bit flushed and very smiley. She fingers one of Sam's sculptures (a man made out of wires and pine needles rowing a boat made out of empty toilet paper rolls with an oar made out of plasticware) and manages to knock the oar off the wire man's hands. "Oops!"

"Okay, maybe don't look with your hands," Sam gently grabs her wrist to push it away.

"Sorry," Carly giggles. "I really should know better."

"Yeah, you should." Sam shoots her a playful glare.

"But I do know enough to say that this is really cool. You might have a knack for this."

"For playing with trash?" Sam snorts. "I'm exactly how all the adults in my life predicted I'd end up," she says sarcastically.

Carly frowns. "All the adults in your life were wrong!" she says severely. Sam blinks at her, a little surprised. Carly rarely gets this heated, especially when Sam isn't being entirely serious. "Besides," Carly continues, tone still severe. "*We're* adults now. So we get to decide what to do with our lives and whether it has value!"

"You're right," Sam agrees, mostly to placate her. She squeezes Carly's arm. "Thanks."

Carly nods fiercely, then grabs her and gives her a passionate kiss that feels more angry than affectionate. "I *love* you," she tells Sam, and that, too, feels furious.

Sam glances around Freddie's little sublet, wondering if there's anywhere she and Carly can slip off to in order to *really* make out. Intense Carly on wolfsbane is...*hot*. "I love you, too," Sam assures her.

Soon, Carly gravitates back over toward Cat, maybe because her laughter is soothing and infectious. Sam focuses back on the fun she's having with all of Spencer's refuse, but it's almost as if it's lost its charm. She keeps thinking about Carly's pronouncement, that they're adults. Sam doesn't *feel* like an adult. She never has, even when she was practically raising herself at seven years old, when Melanie went away to boarding school and Sam was left to fend for herself in a household with an inconsistent mother, before she ever met Carly. Maybe someone needs to have a childhood to feel like an adult. Maybe if there's no real contrast, it just all feels like...struggling.

She thinks about Spencer, how he's always seemed much younger than he is. How his art and his career pursuit of it has always seemed to center *fun*. Is that even something that's possible? It's not like Spencer has ever made that much money at it; Sam knows that Carly's father supports Spencer financially, just as he's supporting Carly as she goes to college. Well, too bad Sam doesn't have a rich father (or even a father *at all*...). She also has two girlfriends who are both pursuing careers in the arts as well.

Maybe one of them has to be the practical one.

Sam likes art. It's exactly why she takes classes at community college, just to have an excuse to make more of it. But it's never something she's expected to make money at.

But on the other hand...right now, their bills and expenses are covered, between the money Cat and Carly get from their families, the money she and Cat make babysitting, and the occasional money Carly brings in by tutoring. Maybe Sam can still coast along for a while, before she *really* has to try to grow up, get a job, and become a contributing member of society.

The whole notion of it makes her cringe. But then, that reaction makes her fear turning into her mother.

Sam is *not* her mother. She's not about to get a corporate job to prove she isn't. But she's also not going to rely on people she sleeps with forever, either.

She shakes her head. This is a *party*. She doesn't need to be weighed down by thoughts of an uncertain future.

She goes to the kitchen to eat half of the meat and cheese tray that Freddie bought, because food has never let her down.

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After Freddie's party, Sam drives them home, and it's late enough (and Cat's tipsy enough) that she falls asleep pretty much as soon as she brushes her teeth and gets in bed.

The next day, Saturday, Freddie comes over in the afternoon so that he can film some things for *iCarly* with Sam and Carly. They've been working on it all summer, having moved away from the live aspect of the show, filming little loosely scripted sketches that Freddie then edits together and posts. It gives them a bit more freedom, especially necessary since they don't have a regular studio space anymore.

Cat is proud of them. She has occasionally sat in on meetings, she's often been incorporated into their sketches, but it is, overall, Sam and Carly's project with Freddie, and not hers. She does always enjoy it when she gets to watch, though sometimes she laughs so much that she has to leave so they can get a clean take.

After they finish filming, Freddie hangs around for a while, until Sam bluntly tells him, "We have plans. Go home." Freddie isn't even hurt, because he's used to Sam's attitude, and he takes his leave before the sun really starts to set.

Which is good, because wolfsbane isn't the plan for tonight.

Instead, it's time for the first wolf night in their new apartment.

Cat starts cooking meatloaf for dinner as the sun starts to set, and Sam and Carly go into the changing room (appropriately named, now that Cat thinks about it) to prepare to become wolves. Cat is often curious about this process, mainly because it's something that doesn't include her. She's seen what it looks like when Sam changes, how it's both gruesome and fascinating, and she wonders what else is involved in the ritual besides getting naked. Especially when there's more than one werewolf. Sam, Carly, and Tori always go into the woods with plenty of time to spare before sunset. Is it because there's something else special involved? For some reason, Cat thinks of Catholicism sometimes when she imagines werewolves in a group. She thinks of incense, of chanting that turns into howls, of a mysticism surrounding the process of transformation. Of some kind of ritual to give this wonderful, magnificent power the gravity it deserves.

Maybe Cat doesn't want to know what actually goes on when werewolves change. If it turns out they just stand there naked until it's time, she'll be disappointed that it's so boring.

Once they change, though, it's never boring.

Cat hums a song she's been writing as she puts together a salad (just for her, since the wolves won't want any) while the meatloaf cooks. She glances out the window at the dimming sky. She wonders when they'll be finished.

She doesn't have to wonder long, as only moments later, both werewolves bound out of the back of the house and down the short hallway toward her, tails wagging, whimpering yips in their throats. Cat kneels down to greet them both with scratches behind the ears and hugs around their necks, then pulls away with a squeal of outrage as Sam licks her cheek. Carly shoots Sam what Cat can only interpret as a disapproving look.

Dinner is greatly enjoyed by everyone, but afterwards, the wolves clearly have energy to burn. Too much energy. Maybe it was a mistake to put off Shadow Creek Park until the end of the full moon, because Sam and Carly are *rambunctious*.

It's fun at first. They chase each other through the apartment, then they chase Cat, until Carly knocks over an armchair in the dressing room, and her tail immediately falls between her legs. Cat laughs it off, though, because she can quickly see that the chair isn't damaged, and both wolves wag their tails as Cat admonishes them to be careful.

They are a little more careful for a few minutes, until Sam manages to knock over a table in the living room, and Cat hears the sound of glass shattering.

Everyone freezes. Both wolves pull their ears back and lower their heads. "Don't move!" Cat orders them. She's still wearing shoes, so she walks carefully over to the tipped over table, and quickly finds the source of the glass that is scattered over the floor.

It's a picture frame, with a photo of her and Nona in it.

Cat takes a deep breath. She's *not* thrilled, but at least it's something easily replaceable. "It's just this," she tells the werewolves in a dull voice. "Nothing expensive."

They still don't move, though Carly's ears begin to lift a bit. Sam still looks guilty as hell.

"Both of you stay there until I clean up all the glass," Cat orders, and uses both a broom and a vacuum cleaner to get all the pieces. Both wolves cower from the noise of the vacuum cleaner. It would make Cat feel bad if it weren't also kind of funny.

Pretty quickly, it becomes obvious that this new apartment isn't *quite* ideal for wolf nights, because it's actually smaller in a lot of ways than their old apartment. Maybe not in raw square footage, but in the layout. The hallway is shorter because the patio door is placed at the back of the kitchen instead. The living room is smaller because of the second bedroom.

It's just not quite as easy for the wolves to run around in here.

Still, though. A wolf night in the apartment has one very big saving grace:

Cat gets into bed at the end of the night and both wolves curl up with her. She feels warm and safe, and there's plenty of room for all three of them, even when they change back and slip under the covers at dawn to cuddle her for longer.

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It isn't until the last night of the full moon in August that it really starts to hit Tori that summer is ending.

*Where* did it even go? Looking back on it, she knows that a lot happened; her memories are packed with parties and time with friends and time with Jade. But it also feels like it completely flew by, like she ate an entire cake in one big gulp without even taking the time to consider how good it tasted.

Well, that's something she could imagine Sam doing, but Tori isn't usually so frivolous with food. But she also doesn't think she's typically so frivolous with time, either. Maybe that's what's so baffling about summer already being almost over. She *thought* she'd been savoring it, but...it's already gone.

Almost, anyway. There are still a couple of weeks left before school starts back up again. Though the last trip to Shadow Creek Park of the summer feels acutely poignant. By next month, they'll be wrangling homework and school and the lack of sleep as they attempt to carve out an evening all together. Tori knows they will make a powerful effort to enjoy their monthly trip all together; they haven't ever skipped a month that she can recall. But it will be harder.

And as they progress in school, Tori knows there will probably come a time when they just *can't* make it work. She fears that.

It's been a great summer, though. Tori can't deny that. She got to spend *so much* time with her friends. It feels like they were partying in Beck's trailer at least once a week, and otherwise spent time hanging out at people's houses, or at restaurants, or making art. There were birthday celebrations: Cat's in June, then the realization that Carly and Jade's birthdays are only a few days apart in July, and the joint birthday party at Tori's house that is one of the wildest parties she thinks they've ever had.

Maybe, she considers, a small benefit to school starting again is that she'll be sober a lot more often. It's also possibly a little ironic that she's less likely to drink during the school year (though smoking an occasional bowl with Jade on weekends isn't unheard of). Parties are fun, but it's very possible to overdo it.

It's also been fun having Freddie around. They'd all kind of gotten used to him when he'd come down on school breaks to hang out with Sam and Carly, but he'd really integrated himself with the group this summer, when he stayed in Los Angeles for all but a couple of weeks. Tori had helped with a couple of *iCarly* sketches, and thought it was cool seeing Freddie in his element. Though even with that, she'd also grown used to watching him work with Jade over the summer as they shot the movie Jade is still working on editing during her free time. Jade had clearly appreciated his camera knowledge and skills, and sometimes Tori remembers them laying out which camera or lens they might want to use to accomplish particular shots. It's always nice to see Jade actually being able to collaborate with someone. It's probably a combination of the fact that Freddie is very used to scary women, having befriended Sam, and that Jade actually seems to respect his work.

It's going to be weird when Freddie goes back to school. Even weirder that Robbie will be going with him. Tori prefers when all her people are local. And she knows how lucky she is that most of the time, her favorite people *are* local.

It reminds her of Spencer's visit, and how much it had meant to Carly to have someone so important to her be so closeby. As a group, they hadn't actually spent too much time with Spencer, though they'd all gone to the unveiling of his sculpture at Hollywood Arts and then Spencer took them out to a restaurant with an arcade inside that he pitched as "Funk E. Fester's for grown-ups!" They had a great time playing games on Spencer's dime (or, apparently, his father's credit card, as Carly later revealed to Tori). The place had a bar, but Carly had forbidden any of them to even try to order, because she didn't want Spencer to know that she ever drank. It was kind of funny to think of the guy who took them to an arcade as being a parental figure to Carly, but Tori also understands how close the siblings are.

She can't imagine ever having that kind of relationship with Trina.

Other than the celebration of Spencer's sculpture, Tori had only seen him during the full moon in June, which had been unusual, but fun. While it had been nice to have a fourth wolf around to even out the group, Tori is glad that this full moon, it's just the core group of them: herself, Sam, Carly, and Cat and Jade.

"I can't believe by next full moon we'll be in school," Tori says wistfully as they stand in the grove of trees and undress.

"Don't remind me," Sam grumbles.

"I'm kind of looking forward to school, though," Carly admits.

Sam looks askance at her. "That is the *least* sexy thing you have *ever* said," she says, looking horrified.

"I know what you mean," Tori agrees with Carly, making Sam grunt judgmentally. "But I'm also just...not quite done with summer."

"Oh, no, me neither" Carly insists. "It's been a great summer."

Tori decides to voice part of what she's been worrying about lately. "Listen. I know that we always make nights like this a priority. But as our classes get more and more involved, I know that there might be a possibility that—"

"Tori," Sam says warningly. "Don't."

"I know we're always going to *try*," Tori starts to say, "just—"

"I hear you, and we all know that," Sam says firmly. "I'm just...not ready to think about it yet. I need this," she admits. "Don't talk about taking it away from me until we *have* to."

Tori presses her lips together and nods. "You're right."

"Besides," Carly says brightly. "We're only sophomores. I don't think things are going to get *super* crazy until we're upperclassmen, at least."

Tori agrees with Carly on that, at least. Sure, these next couple semesters are probably going to be harder. But she doesn't think they're going to be running themselves into the ground *quite* yet.

And for now, they have a balmy summer night to look forward to, a cloudless sky, the stars only obscured by the brightness of the full moon overhead, the earth beneath their paws, the scent of their girlfriends on the wind as they howl out the joy of being creatures and bound out into a park that feels like only theirs.

There's probably some sort of irony in the fact that the guy who isn't in school is the one who throws the back to school parties, but Beck enjoys celebrating his friends' accomplishments. He may be in a cutthroat business, but he's always believed that humility and graciousness will take him far.

He can't say for certain that it's those qualities that have gotten him his first recurring television role (they've started filming, too, so it feels...*real*), but he feels good about where his career is going, even without going to college.

It isn't that Beck didn't enjoy school, or hasn't considered college. He has. As much as acting has always been the goal, Beck knows really making it as a working actor is still a long shot, and has considered other options. In another life, Beck can see himself as a high school English teacher, or maybe a car mechanic. But he's also an optimist, and the arrangement he has with his parents in which he lives in their driveway is still a good fit, so while he has the financial security, the time, and the youthful good looks, he wants to try to launch an acting career before he falls back on anything else.

Still, as much as he doesn't want to be in school right now, he does feel a little wistful when everyone else goes back to school. It's especially hard this year, when Robbie is going to school, too.

Beck has always suspected that Robbie taking a gap year between high school and college had...a *little bit* to do with him, and their new relationship. Though he also knows he can't take all the credit, either, that Robbie was still deciding what he wanted to pursue in education. He'd even been accepted to a few schools, but had just decided he wasn't ready. Later, Beck found out that part of the hesitation had also been because he would be getting less financial assistance from his parents if he pursued performing arts in college; they felt that his private high school should have been "enough" schooling for that.

But now, Robbie is going to a *really* good school, his parents are proud of him and helping him pay for it. Even though Robbie has never actually put it into words, Beck knows how much his parents' approval means to him. Even if Beck wonders sometimes whether computer science is something Robbie would ever *really* want to do with his life, he supports this for his boyfriend.

It's going to *suck* having Robbie so far away, though. They've rarely been apart since they got together. Robbie spends far more nights in Beck's trailer than he spends at home.

His trailer, the very symbol of his independence, is going to feel *lonely*.

Tonight, though, it's the place to be, as he throws one final party to usher in the end of summer break. In two days, Robbie and Freddie will be driving up to Stanford. A few days after that, the semester will officially begin for them. And also for Jade, whose school schedule always seems to be the earliest among their local friends. Then, it'll be Sam and Cat's turn, and then Tori, Andre and Carly.

And then Beck will be the only one not in school, attending auditions for advertisements and guest roles in between weeks spent on set as a recurring character who's in about half of the episodes of the season.



He's sitting on his bed with a beer in one hand, and his other arm around Robbie, surveying his party guests, more in a cursory sort of way to make sure everyone seems okay, because everyone is quite at home in his trailer at this point. Even Freddie, who is sitting on the floor, leaning against Beck's bed, as he talks to Robbie about the best route to drive between Los Angeles and the Bay Area, and the truck stops with clean bathrooms he likes to stop at. Robbie is listening raptly, and Beck decides to listen in as well, figuring at some point he might end up taking a trip up to visit his boyfriend, and maybe it would be good to know some travel tips. Beck likes to know things like this. He has maps of routes for trips he will probably never take in his mind.

This reminds him of what he's heard from Sam about her motorcycle journey around the country a few years ago, in which she visited all of the lower 48 states. He may be a Canadian at heart, despite how long he's lived in the US, but he can't deny that this country has some beautiful land. He wouldn't mind seeing more of it. Maybe not on a motorcycle. That's not his style. But an RV, with a place to lay his head? Yeah. That might be really cool.

Maybe he can take his RV up when he goes to visit Robbie. It might be really nice to bring a place familiar to both of them when he visits. It'll almost certainly be better than staying in Robbie's dorm.

Speaking of which, Robbie and Freddie are discussing their roommates. Robbie got assigned a fellow freshman, and he's been nervous every time he's texted him, about things like who is bringing a minifridge, and who is bringing a TV.

Freddie shrugs. "I roomed with a randomly assigned guy last year. It was fine. He was quiet and polite but we didn't have much in common. He was really into anime and I just don't know that much about it, so we mostly left each other alone. A guy in one of my classes asked to room with me this year because he wasn't getting along with his roommate. He's also a Computer Science major so it seems like a good fit."

Robbie nods. His attention is *fully* on Freddie, like he hopes that Freddie's anecdote will offer some kind of roadmap for his own experience with his random roommate. "Too bad you already agreed to room with him before we knew I was coming to Stanford, eh?" he jokes. It comes out awkward, feeble.

"Yeah, too bad," Freddie replies, just as awkwardly.

Beck frowns. He *really* doesn't like the moments when it's so abundantly clear that Robbie has a crush on Freddie. Beck has tried to talk to him about it, has tried to reassure him that it's okay if he does, that Beck just wants him to be honest, but Robbie has always denied it. He'll admit that Freddie is cute, and Beck has assured him he agrees, but it never goes beyond that. Maybe Robbie is worried that Beck is trying to trap him, somehow. Beck *did* date Jade for a long time. He knows all sorts of ways someone can attack someone else with jealousy.

But it makes him *more* jealous when Robbie *denies* it.

Oddly, this part makes him more sympathetic to Jade's anguish, back when they were dating, even if Jade's perception of his interest in other women had always been false. But Beck

understands now, in a way he didn't then, why someone's reassurance and insistence that they have eyes only for you *might* not be very persuasive.

*Especially* when it's so obvious where Robbie's eyes stray.

A small part of Beck worries about this. About being so far away from Robbie, while he's so close to someone he has a crush on. But he already knows they aren't taking any classes together, he's heard them talk about how their dorms are on opposite sides of the campus. They'd probably have to actually make an effort to hang out with each other at school, and he thinks Robbie is probably too shy to ask, and as nice as Freddie is to Robbie, Beck doesn't think he's that desperate to hang out with him, one on one.

He shouldn't worry. He *knows* Robbie loves him. They've talked a lot about how they're going to stay connected while Robbie is at school, how they'll find ways to prioritize their time together.

Besides, Freddie is straight. Beck supposes there are always those straight guys who are willing to take advantage of a queer guy's crush on them to get some no-recipe head, but Freddie doesn't seem like one of those guys.

Beck *won't* worry. He trusts Robbie, and he even trusts Freddie. Robbie is a great boyfriend, and Freddie is a good guy.

He decides he'll at least be happy that Freddie is there to look out for Robbie, and focus on his relationship rather than worry about some straight guy who clearly feels awkward about his boyfriend's crush.

## **September 2014**

"Okay, so..." Sam starts uncertainly. "Um, have you ever *actually* driven a car before?"

"I've ridden a bicycle," Cat replies confidently, gripping the steering wheel in front of her.

"Okay..." Sam drawls. "That's...not really the same—"

"I have to follow traffic laws on a bicycle too, you know," Cat points out.

"Right. Right, yeah, I guess that's true," Sam considers. "But—okay, so, I guess we should start from scratch. Good thing your grandma's car is an automatic. Let's start with the pedals. So the left one is—"

"The brake," Cat supplies. She smiles. "I know from playing those driving games at the arcade."

"Yeah, it's the brake, you're right," Sam nods. "And the right is the gas. Okay. So, you put your hands on the steering wheel like—"

"Ten o'clock and two o'clock," Cat offers. "They told us that in driver's ed."

“Wait, you took driver’s ed?”

“Yeah. At school. I liked it because it meant I could stay after school and hang out with my friends!” It wasn’t a required course, or even a regular one, but Jade, longing for independence, had taken it freshman year, and Cat had taken it with her, assuming, at the time, that she might start driving in a few years. It just...didn’t quite happen that way.

“But you’ve never driven a car?”

“It wasn’t that kind of driver’s ed. It was just like, classroom stuff.”

“I see.” Sam looks like she’s trying to decide where to go from here, and says, “Okay, so then why don’t you just...give it a try.”

“Give what a try?”

“Driving.”

“Here? Now?”

“That’s why you’re in the driver’s seat, isn’t it?”

“I guess.” Cat grips the steering wheel tighter. Why is she so nervous? Maybe because it’s a giant, expensive piece of machinery, even if Sam thinks it’s kind of ugly. “So then, I need to back out of this space.” They’re in the parking lot of their apartment complex. It’s during the day, and no one is around. It should be fine.

“Yep,” Sam replies. As the silence stretches, she asks, “Do you know how to put it in reverse?”

“Oh, right, um...” Cat looks down toward her right, searching for the gearshift. She lifts the armrests that cover the comically tiny “middle” seat in the front row of seats, just to make sure there isn’t a gearshift beneath it. “Uh...”

“It’s on the steering wheel,” Sam informs her, pointing at a handle behind and above her steering wheel. “You have to pull it toward you a little and then pull down. You can see what gear you’re in on the dashboard.”

The dashboard is still kind of a *lot*—all the words make sense but it’s hard to take it in all at once—but Cat looks at it warily as she does what Sam says. There’s a mechanical *clunking* sound, and Cat notices movement, and sees a little line move from a *P* to an *R* on a line of letters. “Oh!”

“You’re in reverse?” Sam asks.

“Yeah.”

“Okay, then. You can take your foot off the brake and use the gas.” Cat does so, just as Sam warns, “Slowly—” and the car jerks back a few feet before Cat slams on the brake again.

Cat shrieks slightly, then sits with her foot firmly on the brake and her hands squeezing the steering wheel. “That was...”

“A little too much.” Sam looks amused. “You’re fine, just try it again. A lot more gentle this time.”

“Okay.” Cat takes a deep breath and nudges the gas very gently. The car barely moves. She does it again, and slowly inches out of the space. “Don’t I need to turn the wheel?” Cat asks.

“Sure, you’ll need to turn it in the direction you want the back of the car to go,” Sam advises. Cat turns the wheel and looks out the rearview mirror, but she can’t see very much. She’s seen her dad, and her brother, and Sam and Nona all twist their whole bodies around to look out the back of the car. She feels like she’s almost too small as she attempts this, keeping an eye on how close she is to the cars parked behind her, still tapping the gas pedal with her toe. Then Sam shouts, “Stop!”

Cat hits the brake immediately. “What?”

“Shit. My fault,” Sam says. “I should’ve told you to turn it more gradually. Your turn is a little too sharp and you’re about to scrape the car next to us.”

“Oh my god.” Cat looks out Sam’s window, at how close the other car is. “What do I do?”

“You should put it back into drive and straighten it out and then back out again.”

“Drive?” Cat asks, almost panicking at this point. “How do I drive?”

Sam gazes at her uncertainly. “Maybe I’d better back out for you.”

“Yes, please,” Cat says gratefully.

Sam reminds her to put the car in park and, because Sam can’t really open her door without *definitely* hitting the car next to them, they crawl over each other on the seat to switch places. Sam settles into the seat and relatively quickly straightens the car out and backs out of the space so that the car is facing a straight shot of parking lot between two rows of cars. She looks over at Cat. “Ready to try again?”

“I guess so,” Cat says weakly.

Cat gets back in the driver’s seat and makes a slow loop around the parking lot a few times. Sam helps guide her by reminding her how to look and gauge how much room she has on the passenger’s side of the car. It feels counterintuitive, because Cat wants to be in the *middle* of the space, but of course, she’s *not* in the middle of the car. But as she drives with Sam, she starts to be able to place the car on the road (or...the parking lot).

After some practice, Cat goes back toward the parking space. She hesitates, and looks at Sam for help.

“Want me to park it?” Sam asks.

“Okay,” Cat agrees. Truthfully, she wants to try, but...the risk seems too great. She *really* doesn’t want to scratch another car learning how to park.

Sam gets into the driver’s seat and effortlessly parks the car. Cat is barely even able to watch and understand the way she turns the wheel, and can’t see the way she moves her feet, but she’s obviously much more confident than Cat is.

Sam turns to smile at Cat and pats the car’s dashboard affectionately, then they begin walking back toward the apartment.

“Well?” Sam asks, “How do you feel?”

Cat loops her arm with Sam’s, in part because Sam has started to veer automatically toward their old apartment, something that still happens on occasion. “I guess it went okay,” she says reluctantly.

“Want me to drive with you tomorrow after school?” Sam offers. It’s the beginning of the semester, and driving to college with Sam has made Cat consider that it’s time to really buckle down and learn to drive.

“Actually,” Cat hedges, “I think I’ll drive with Carly tomorrow.” She’s curious whether Carly’s methods will be different. She appreciates Sam’s patience with her, but she kind of wishes that Sam had guided her through things like parking, instead of just doing it for her.

Sam nods, “Spencer taught us both to drive,” she notes. “She’ll probably teach a lot like me.”

But Sam is...not right about that.

There’s divergence almost from the moment Carly gets into the car with Cat. “Okay, so, we can start by carefully backing out of the space,” Carly begins.

“Right,” Cat agrees, then puts the car into reverse and starts to turn her body to look out the back.

“Wait,” Carly says. “You forgot a step.”

“What do you mean?” Cat asks. She checks to make sure her seatbelt is on and double-checks that she’s in reverse.

“The parking brake,” Carly says, in a gentle tone that suggests this is a common reminder. “Turn the parking brake off.”

Cat stares at the dashboard. “How do I do that?”

“Sam didn’t show you?”

“No...” Cat says slowly.

“Okay, um...” Carly cranes her neck over toward Cat and looks past her, toward her feet. “I think on this kind of car there should be, like, a lever you pull or something?”

Cat looks around for any sort of lever and pulls one next to her steering wheel. She squeaks in surprise when the windshield suddenly gets sprayed with water and the windshield wipers start swishing back and forth.

“No, not there, more toward your feet. Hold on...” Carly leans over her lap and reaches past her, groping around under the steering wheel.

Cat giggles. “You don’t need an excuse to get close to me, you know,” she teases, batting her eyelashes a little.

Carly grins up at her. “Calm down. I’m on a mission here.” Then her expression turns more serious. “I can’t find it,” she groans, then sits up and opens the glove compartment and starts rifling through an owner’s manual.

“Isn’t there,” Cat ventures uncertainly, “like, a light or something on the dashboard that should tell me that the parking brake is on?”

“Yeah, somewhere,” Carly affirms distractedly.

“Well, unless the light *itself* isn’t working...I don’t think the parking brake is on,” Cat informs her.

“Wait, it’s—” Carly leans back over onto her lap again. “You’re *right*. Wait a minute. Sam doesn’t *use* the parking brake!?”

“I...” Cat has never really thought about it. “I guess not?”

“Oh, I’m going to have a talk with her,” Carly mutters, sounding irritated.

“Is it bad?” Cat asks.

“It’s not *bad*, it’s just *safer*, and better for the car, for some reason Spencer explained to me one time that I can’t remember the details about because a lot of car stuff just goes right over my head,” Carly says firmly. She flips to a page in the owner’s manual and a moment later says, “Oh! Okay, so this parking brake is, you see that much smaller extra pedal that’s way over to the left? Step on it.”

Cat does, and sees a light that says *Brake* light up on the dashboard. “You want me to turn on the parking brake?” she questions.

“Yes, and then to turn it off, press the pedal again, and it should pop back up.”

Cat obeys, and utters, “Oh!” when the parking brake is lifted. It’s kind of neat, actually.

“Okay, it’s off,” she tells Carly.

“Okay. *Always* use it,” Carly instructs her severely. “Now, start backing out of the space. Stay straight at first,” she advises.

Cat begins to slowly back out of the space, and Carly guides her on when to turn the wheel so that there’s no damage to the adjacent cars. Even after just one day of driving with Sam, Cat

feels a little more secure behind the wheel, like certain things about maneuvering the car are starting to click.

She's out of the space, and mostly straight on, facing the path between two rows of parked cars. So far, so good. She smiles at Carly. "So should I drive a lap around the parking lot?" she asks.

"Go for it," Carly agrees, smiling back.

Cat moves along at a slow pace, feeling good about this decision. It's not that Sam doesn't *trust* her to drive, but Sam always wants to step up to help her, and Carly, at least, gives her the freedom to try first.

She thinks this is going very well until she's coming to a corner and Carly suddenly hollers, "Go to the left! Go to the left!" *very* urgently.

Cat jerks the wheel to the left and brakes, hard. "What? What happened?"

"You were close to those cars," Carly says shakily.

"Was I?" Cat feels shaken, too, because she hadn't realized she was close. She thought she'd been getting the hang of figuring out where her car is in space compared to her vantage point.

"It's okay," Carly says. "Let's keep going."

But Cat can tell that Carly sounds reluctant. "Are *you* okay?" she asks her.

"Yeah," Carly says weakly. "I don't think I realized how terrifying it is when new drivers are behind the wheel when *I* was learning to drive," she confesses.

"That makes sense, because I'm not terrified," Cat tells her.

Carly chuckles at that, and takes a deep breath, and then encourages Cat to continue.

Cat does. She drives a few laps around the parking lot, moving a little faster with each one. She's beginning to feel more confident, but she has to admit, it's *awfully* distracting when she hears the way Carly hisses in breaths when Cat turns corners, or picks up speed, or when she notices the way Carly grips the armrest on the car door with white knuckles. Sure, maybe it encourages Cat to be more careful, but it also just makes her *far* more nervous than she needs to be, just driving around a parking lot in which she's the only car moving.

Carly does successfully guide her into parking the car, rather than doing it for her. Cat has to back up and straighten out a couple of times, and even then, it's a bit of a squeeze for Carly to get out on her side, but she's in the space, and mostly straight in.

"Thank you," Cat tells her genuinely.

"You're welcome," Carly grins, clearly relieved to have her feet on solid ground.

Cat feels torn. She wonders if she could ask Jade to help her, or maybe Beck. She could see Tori or Andre being just as high-strung teaching her as Carly just was. And Robbie is so far away...she misses him. She'd rather not think about that.

But if she has to outsource this to another friend, it might take her *even longer* to learn to drive, and Cat has already waited long enough. She should've tried to learn this over the summer. There was just so much else to do that was more fun back then. This is a welcome respite from homework and housework.

The solution turns out to be something Carly suggests: why not take both of them?

"Sam is so calm, she'll probably keep us both steady," Carly explains. "In fact, she's so *calm*, she doesn't even bother with *basic safety precautions* like *setting the parking brake*." She glares.

Sam's eyes widen defensively. "Hey, I'm honestly worried that if I stomp down on that little pedal, it'll break right off!"

"Oh, don't give me that, you're just taking the easy road out," Carly folds her arms. "Cat's going to start using it, so you are, too!"

"Okay, okay." Sam holds up her hands to stop the beratement. "So, I'll keep you both calm," she agrees.

"And I'll actually *guide* Cat through things without just doing them for her."

"Hey, it was her first day." Sam sounds wounded.

"But she *wanted* to try," Carly insists. "And I can make sure she can do that."

It works, for the most part. Carly still gets anxious, Sam still struggles to let Cat just *do* things, but they all three find a balance as they let Cat get used to handling a car. Then, she graduates to grocery store parking lots. Then, quiet residential streets that aren't completely hemmed in by cars parked on both sides.

It'll be a while before Cat actually drives on the surface streets of Los Angeles, but she's fine taking her time to get there. Now that she's actually learning how to handle a car for herself, she has a whole new appreciation for how terrifying the streets of Los Angeles actually are.

Not to mention the freeways.

Yeah, that scene in *Clueless* makes a whole lot more sense now.



# Roughness

**September 2014**

Class has been in session for a few weeks now, and Freddie is getting into the swing of things. He's very comfortable at school, very at home. The only place he's more comfortable is behind a camera, but to be honest, school offers him more positive reinforcement and praise, considering his grades are always top notch. He's liable to get forgotten behind a camera, which can satisfy a different sort of need at times, but often, he prefers the sense of superiority he gets from academic success.

In a way, college so far is a lot like high school: as long as Freddie puts his effort into the work, he gets great grades, the professors like him, the other students seem to recognize how well he does. He's *still* a nerd, except here, at least, it's a bit more of an enviable status to hold. Back in high school, he was really only "popular," to a degree, because of his connection to Carly and Sam, something that became especially apparent when they both left. Here, he's just Freddie, and his academic performance alone dictates how he interacts with his peers. If anyone recognizes him from *iCarly*, they haven't mentioned it.

In fact, like the nerd he is, he'd stayed after class to ask his professor a question, which turned into walking with the professor to his office, which turn into a much longer, more personal conversation during his professor's office hours, until they both realized another student was waiting outside to see this professor and Freddie left. Sam used to call him an ass-kisser whenever he managed to have a friendly chat with a teacher in high school, but now, that's kind of the whole point of college. It's about making connections as much as learning.

Yeah. He's at home here, for sure.

Right now, he has a couple of hours before he and his roommate are planning to meet some other guys in their program at one of the dining halls for dinner. His plan is to head back to his dorm to work on homework. The more he completes now, the more likely it is that he'll have time for some video games in the evening. His roommate is a gamer, too, and they have a few games in common that they both sometimes play together (especially *Starlords*, this older real-time strategy game Freddie discovered last year and has gotten really good at). It's cool to have a roommate who is more than just a quiet presence, but Freddie has noticed his roommate is not quite as diligent about studying as he is. He hopes this tendency doesn't rub off on him.

He's mostly thinking about homework as he walks. There are other students walking around, because there always are, but not the throngs of students that crowd the walkways just before and after most classes begin. Freddie glances at them as he walks, on the off-chance that it's someone he knows. He wouldn't want to be rude by accidentally ignoring someone.

That's why he notices when she comes walking toward him.

He stops in his tracks.

“*Sam?!* ” he asks incredulously. “What’re you—”

He cuts himself off, because he just can’t understand how this is possible. This *can’t* be Sam. She’s dressed *completely* differently, for one thing, in a skirt and a buttoned blouse, but she has that same curly blonde hair, that same cute, round face.

The girl looks behind her, then back at him, and smiles awkwardly. “Sorry, you have me confused with someone else.” Her voice is soft, and she ducks her head.

This has to be a prank. For what reason, Freddie can’t even comprehend, but Sam has gone too far. “Hold on a min—” He reaches for her arm.

Too fast, she pulls her arm away. “Excuse me?” She looks affronted. The dangerous look in her blue eyes appears more Sam-like than ever, but something about her voice triggers something in Freddie.

“Wait a minute,” Freddie breathes. “Are you...”

Now that she’s actually looking at him—more like *glaring* at him, but still—her own expression seems to soften. “Hang on,” she says in a voice far too sweet to be Sam’s. “I know you! Aren’t you Freddie? My sister’s friend?”

Sam can commit to a prank, but she’s not *nearly* this good at acting. Freddie closes his mouth, realizing that it’s dropped open. “Holy shit,” he breathes. “You’re Sam’s twin. Sam *actually* has a twin!”

“I actually prefer Melanie,” she informs him with a slight giggle.

“Sorry, I—” Freddie shakes his head. “I know we met one time before, but...a part of me has *never* been quite sure that you aren’t an elaborate prank of Sam’s.”

Melanie shrugs. “It would be the kind of thing she’d do. Though if it makes you feel any better, the last time she and I pranked someone, I had to pretend to be even worse than she is.”

Somehow this isn’t reassuring. If this pleasant, nice girl who (holy shit) is apparently attending Stanford can act even worse than Sam, maybe Sam’s acting is better than Freddie thought. But then, the logic here is circular, because Sam’s acting prowess to impersonate her fake twin would be dependent on said twin’s own acting chops and okay, Freddie isn’t going to entertain this false premise any longer. “Sorry, I, um. I bet you get tired of being mistaken for her,” he offers.

“To be honest, it hasn’t happened that often,” she replies. “I was well-known enough at my boarding school before my sister got internet famous. Here and at my last school, sure, I got looks sometimes, but most people don’t say anything. I think typically the way I carry myself makes it clear that I am not her.”

Yeah, that much makes sense. Especially now that they’re having a conversation, it’s pretty easy to see that there’s just *no way* this is Sam.

Freddie's brain is still kind of breaking at this realization. He'd really never been quite sure that he could trust anything that had happened when Melanie had visited Seattle that one time. I mean, she'd probably visited other times, but he'd only seen her once and...well, now he can't help but remember the fact that they've kissed.

Immediately, he feels awkward. "Sorry," he laughs.

She tilts her head to the side. "What are you apologizing for?"

"I guess I'm just still catching up to the fact that you're real," he admits. "And I was kind of a jerk to you the last time we saw each other."

"Well, you did think I was Sam." She shrugs, seeming to indicate he has nothing to worry about, and then smiles, her eyes dipping to his shoulders, his arms. "You've certainly... *changed* since then," she remarks.

There's a flirtatious edge to her tone. Right? That's what's happening, right? Oh, god, Freddie really doesn't know. He's *so* not good at this stuff. Sometimes he thinks Robbie is hitting on him, too, and *that's* awkward, because Robbie has a boyfriend, and sure, it's *flattering* or whatever, but Freddie isn't going to be the kind of guy who'd cheat with someone but *why* is he thinking about Robbie right now *anyway* when Melanie is *right here* and okay, she'd gone on a date with him *years* ago, when they were basically *kids* and that doesn't mean she might *still* be into him, and, "You're still...nothing like Sam," is all he can think of to say in response.

"That seems to be the constant in our lives," Melanie observes.

"Where are you headed?" Freddie finally asks, because they're just standing in the middle of the sidewalk, and people keep walking by, and it's a little weird.

"I was going back to my dorm," she tells him.

"So was I. I'm over there." He points toward his building. "I'm guessing you're..." He glances behind him.

"Yeah." She points. She lives between where Freddie and Robbie live, on another end of campus. Freddie wonders if he'd ever have run into her if he hadn't stayed late to talk to his professor today.

"I'll walk with you," he offers. Why not? Homework can wait.

"Thank you!" She seems delighted as they fall into step together.

"I didn't know you went here," he remarks. "Sam never said anything."

"She didn't tell me you were at school here, either!" Melanie replies.

"We're both sophomores, right? Were you here last year?"

"No, I transferred this year," she explains.

“Oh! Where were you before?”

“Yale,” she replies. There’s something in her voice, some minute hesitation, as if she expects that such an admission will yield a negative reaction.

Not from Freddie, though. He just nods. “That’s quite a change. Location-wise, I mean. It’s a great school, but so is Stanford.” Melanie just nods her agreement and doesn’t say anything else, so Freddie asks, “Why come all the way across the country?”

She looks uncomfortable. “I’ve spent a lot of time in New England, and I guess I was just ready for a change,” she replies succinctly.

Freddie is certain that’s not the whole story, but he’s equally certain it’s none of his business. “Well it’s...really cool that you’re here,” he tells her.

She chuckles. “I like it so far!”

Freddie shakes his head. “I *still* can’t believe Sam didn’t give me a heads up.”

“To be fair,” Melanie starts levelly, “I don’t think I *actually* told her which school I’m attending. I think I just said I’d be in the Bay Area.”

“Oh. Why not?”

Melanie waves a hand. “It just...things like this don’t matter to Sam. It wouldn’t mean much to her, and I’d just feel like I was bragging or something, I don’t know. It’s more important that she knows how to reach me than she knows what I’m studying or where.”

“What are you studying?” Freddie wonders.

“Environmental engineering,” Melanie replies, her expression lighting up as she says it.

“Oh, wow,” Freddie nods. “That’s got to be really cool.” Okay, he knows the *basics* of what it entails, but that’s about it. He wishes he had something more intelligent to say.

“Yeah, that’s another reason it made sense to transfer. They offer a great program here.”

“I bet.”

There’s a stretch of quiet as they finish the walk to Melanie’s dorm. It’s a nice afternoon, warm, but not hot, but the girl next to him is both. Freddie wishes he could make his mouth say something interesting or fun, but he just silently escorts her to her door.

And if there was any lingering doubt about her identity, he catches a glimpse of her student ID as she slides it out of her messenger bag.

“Thank you,” she flashes him a smile. “It was nice to see you again.”

“You, too.” She begins to turn away, and Freddie manages to make his mouth work. “Hey, so, um. Maybe do you want each other’s phone numbers? It might be nice to, you know. See

each other again?”

She looks delighted as she turns back to him. “Absolutely,” she replies, pulling out her phone.

“Great!” They exchange numbers, and Melanie texts him just the word *Hey* to verify everything is correct.

She looks elated now. “I’ll see you later,” she says as she heads into her building.

“Bye,” Freddie waves, watching her go.

It’s...*totally weird*. He just exchanged phone numbers with *Sam’s twin sister*. Who was... maybe...flirting with him? He’s still not sure about that.

It’s *especially* weird because despite the fact that they share the same face...she’s *clearly not Sam*. It was something he couldn’t see when they were younger, because he’d expected her to just be Sam playing a prank. Maybe it’s because they’re a little older now, too, or because he knows Sam better, but certain differences stand out to him. The way that when Melanie is happy, it’s a kind of *energetic* joy, whereas Sam’s is more...*relaxed*. The way their default expressions are mild and pleasant as compared to stoic and crabby...or, at least those seem to be the default when confronted with him.

And if he’s right about this whole *flirting* thing, maybe their sexualities are just as opposite, too.

Or, he could be wrong. Lipstick lesbians are a thing, right? Well, that’s not something he’s about to ask Sam.

In fact, now that he thinks about it...he’s not about to confront Sam about *any* of this. Melanie didn’t disclose where she’s going to school for a reason. It isn’t Freddie’s job to tell Sam that if Melanie wants to keep it close to the vest. Besides, it’s not like Sam loves to talk about her sister. Things are understandably awkward between them.

Is it even okay for him to befriend Sam’s twin without telling her?

He reasons that it’s probably fine. They’re independent people. Even if he’s closer to Sam in, like, a friendly way, being someone’s twin is an inherent closeness that he can’t comprehend. Melanie can tell Sam about running into him. It’s her news more than his.

Maybe if they *dated* it’d be different...but that’s not happening. All they’ve done is exchange phone numbers. And maybe...flirted? Or, well, Freddie didn’t flirt. Wait, *why* didn’t he flirt? What’s *wrong* with him?

Maybe it’s a bad idea to think about dating someone who shares a face with one of your best friends.

Yeah. Freddie decides he’ll just play it cool. If Melanie texts him, great. If not...maybe it’s better that way.

**November 2014**

The full moon falls early in the month and luckily one of the days—the last day—is on a Friday, which makes a trip to Shadow Creek Park easier to plan. It's after midterms, after the short fall break, and the semester workload is getting intense. At least, Tori knows it is for her and Carly; they have a handful of classes together this semester as well, and they're both taking a psychology elective with Andre to fulfill a general education requirement. Even that class, as peripheral as it's supposed to be in the scheme of things, ends up more work than any of them anticipated; the three of them often meet up after classes to go over notes and homework for their psychology class together. Mostly because there's a lot of random memorization. Like, the concepts all make sense and are interesting, but Tori hadn't realized she was going to have to memorize the structure of the brain, or remember the differences between Pavlov and Skinner to such an extent. But Tori has always liked science, which maybe gives her a bit of an advantage when studying this subject; Andre and Carly are both reasonably interested in the subject, but it genuinely helps them all to go over classwork together. If nothing else, it's a good excuse to hang out.

Sometimes, it feels like her only guaranteed opportunity to spend time with friends, other than monthly meetings at Shadow Creek Park. None of them have seen Beck since school started, though in part it's also because he's been busy filming the new show he's on and keeps a *very* different schedule than any of them do. Tori has really only seen Sam and Cat during the full moon.

But the biggest problem is how little time she gets with Jade. They're doing their best, and the biggest comfort is that they're both in the same boat: they're both very busy, they both wish they had more time together, but they both understand that there's only so much free time in a week. They try to spend at least one night a weekend together, and typically succeed at that. They're usually too tired to go on a date and just watch a movie at home or something else lowkey. Sometimes, they'll get together during the week to just eat takeout and do homework in one of their bedrooms. It's not particularly sexy or romantic, but it's *something*.

From talking to Carly, Tori knows that balancing time together is something the triad are getting used to, too, even though they all live together. Carly hasn't gone into much detail, but Tori gets the sense that for all three of them, the reality of the difficulties in maintaining two intimate relationships while also juggling school, work, and household responsibilities is becoming rather acute.

Shadow Creek Park represents an opportunity for all of them to just get together for a ritual of friendship in the midst of their chaotic lives. At least this weekend it's easier with a Friday park night. Last month they'd ended up doing it on Tuesday, which was difficult for a variety of reasons, but they'd still made it happen. Tori's fear that they might get too busy this semester to manage their park nights seems to not be a reality.

Thank *god*.

She and Jade get to her house first that afternoon after getting out of class. She's surprised to find that the house is empty; at this point in her young adult life, her parents don't always consistently let her know when they're going to be around, and Trina certainly gives no one

any warning about where or when she's going to show up. She's also not expecting their friends to show up for another hour, at least.

Jade sees the way she's sniffing the air, ensuring she can't sense any family members around, and raises an eyebrow. "What's up?" she asks.

"Nobody home," Tori reports.

It occurs to her, with no preamble, just how long it's been since she and Jade had sex. It's probably been...since around the last full moon, actually. That's been another thing about this semester. The lack of sex. Tori still thinks about it a lot, but there just isn't *time*, or when there's time, there isn't *energy*. The best they've been able to manage sometimes is getting on the phone or on video chat and masturbating together, the power of their vibrators absolving them both of the mental effort of cultivating erotic pleasure and just giving them *results*. It's nice to have the option, but Tori often craves the pure intimacy of *actual* sex.

"Are you...thinking what I'm thinking?" Tori ventures. It's the end of a long week and they're both going to have a night with little sleep, but the moon feels like it tugs on her abdomen, full of lust.

Jade's eyebrow lifts higher, seeming to take the corner of her mouth with it. "Depends on what you have in mind."

Tori hunches her shoulders and lowers herself closer to the floor, hands in front of her. Jade can read her body language and turns toward her, slowly backing away.

Tori lunges, beginning to give chase, and Jade puts a couch between them, knees bent, preparing the dart in either direction.

Abruptly, though, Jade begins racing for the stairs, Tori hot on her heels, until they run into Tori's bedroom and she grabs Jade, laughing. Then they're kissing, pushing each other up against walls as they shed clothing, until Tori is on top of her, filling Jade with her fingers, her mouth with Jade, and the room is full of the sounds of pleasure and the smell of sex.

They doze off together for a few minutes after it's over. Tori is deeply content, deeply grateful for the chance to connect with Jade. It's been *too long*. Maybe it's good to sometimes let the moon remind them to take some time for each other. There's always time to catch up on homework later. In theory.

The sound of Tori's phone wakes them up. It's Sam, wanting to know what they want from El Taco Guapo since the triad are picking up dinner on their way there. It's enough of a wakeup call that they're awake and dressed with plenty of time to spare before their friends arrive.

Tori assumes that the fact that she and Jade just had sex is going to be incredibly obvious, at least to the other two werewolves, and is deciding whether she wants to give them a warning look or a smug one when they come in.

Except that it quickly becomes obvious that their three friends are a *little* too preoccupied with their own shit to worry about what Tori and Jade have been up to.

“I just don’t like to work on my art in one of the bedrooms,” Sam is saying defensively as she comes into the house. “It reminds me of when I was locked up in the mental institution.”

“You went there *willingly*,” Carly points out.

“Yeah, but it was damn near impossible to get out. You know how hard it is for us to be caged.”

“You weren’t—” Carly sighs heavily. “Okay, I sympathize, but you make a *lot* of noise when you’re working on art.”

“What, like the sound of my *brushes*?” Sam asks incredulously.

“I think she means the grunting,” Cat supplies.

“*Grunting*?”

“Like, thoughtful noises,” Cat explains.

“I do not *grunt*.”

“Oh, yes you do,” Carly says in an exasperated tone.

“She’s right,” Cat says seriously. “Why do you think I sometimes wear headphones to do homework?”

“Because you have trouble focusing?”

“Exactly. And I have the most trouble focusing when *you’re* being distracting.”

“And,” Carly adds, “With her humming and your grunting, that’s why I tend to go work in the bedroom.”

“Okay, but if we want to use the bedroom, then we won’t be out front *humming* and *grunting* so you should be able to work up there,” Sam says insistently.

“Well, it’s not always easy to pack up my entire workstation and move somewhere else just because you two want to fuck! We have like two other entire rooms you could have sex in.” They’ve all kind of nodded or waved to Tori and Jade when they came in, but Carly finally acknowledges them verbally. “Hi, Tori. Hi, Jade. Sorry about this.”

“Yeah,” Sam rubs the back of her neck. “We’ll discuss this later,” she suggests. “Let’s eat.”

“Of course that’s all you’re thinking about,” Cat mumbles.

It’s not like Cat to be so critical, and Tori exchanges a look with Jade. Sam ignores the comment, though, and starts unpacking fast food bags at the kitchen island.

The triad are conspicuously polite to each other over dinner and in the car on the way to the park. Tori wonders if this trip is even going to be *fun* with the three of them clearly in some



kind of fight.

But as they get into the trees at the park and their clothes start coming off, it seems like a lot of the tension drains away with it.

“I’m sorry,” Carly says genuinely to Sam, then turns and repeats, “I’m sorry,” to Tori.

“What are you apologizing to her for?” Sam asks, a little baffled.

“For making this trip awkward. Look, I’m...not used to sharing a space with other people. That’s why I tend to hole up in the bedroom a lot of the time. I *love* you two, but I need time to myself sometimes.”

Sam is frowning, but she nods slowly. “It just feels personal sometimes. Especially when we, like, knock on the door to ask what you want to do for dinner and you snap at us.”

“I’ll try to get better about that,” Carly says regretfully. “I’m just *stressed*. This semester has been a little crazy.”

“It really has,” Tori cuts in to add, even though she knows this isn’t even really about her.

“Yeah, that’s something I don’t really relate to as someone who just takes classes for fun,” Sam admits.

“And I think Cat and I sometimes don’t treat your art as important when you’re working on it, because we *know* you’re not really doing it for a grade. But we both want you to do it if it’s important to you!”

“We’ll figure it out,” Sam assures her. “Just because Cat and I are used to being around each other, like, *all* the time doesn’t mean you have to be. We’ll try to remember that.”

“Yeah, that’s a little messed up for you two, to be honest.” Carly side-eyes her.

“What’s messed up about it?” Sam asks defensively.

Carly shakes her head, smiling. “In a way, moving in together has just made me realize *how* different our relationships all are.”

But that’s about all she has a chance to say before there’s a collective shudder, and they all begin to transform.

Sam, however, gets one final comment in just as her mouth starts to change shape. “So, Tori, how was banging it out with Jade just before we got there?”

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Oddly, Cat seems more relaxed once Carly and Sam go into the woods with Tori. And seeing her two girlfriends as werewolves seems to improve her mood quite a bit. She laughs and plays with them, she offers affection and vigorous pettings. Jade can see the way both wolves

push their heads into Cat's hands, like her affection is something they've been hungry for, and haven't been able to find in a while.

It's cute. And honestly, Jade feels a similar sort of exchange between herself and Tori. Whenever Tori returns to the wolf form that ultimately brought Jade closer to her, there's a sense of nostalgia, of deep fondness.

She scratches the thick fur of Tori's neck, hearing her tail thump excitedly. They show each other love in so many ways, and part of this entire ritual of visiting the park is just that, an act of love.

Clearly, they all understand it this way.

When it's time to head back to Jade's house, she and Cat get into the car together. "Maybe someday, I'll be able to drive us all to the park," Cat suggests cheerfully.

"Oh, yeah, how's it going learning to drive?"

"It's going okay," Cat shrugs. "As long as I never have to get on a freeway, I'm fine."

"Yeah, good luck with that," Jade snarks.

"I'm going to try for my license over winter break," Cat reports. "That way, at least I'll be able to take Sam and Carly out somewhere when it's *not* a Shadow Creek Park night."

Jade glances over at her. "Like where?"

"I don't know. Just not in the apartment."

"I know it's not always ideal to be inside with a wolf, but—"

"Try being inside with *two*," Cat replies, a bit sharply. She sighs. "The apartment just feels too small for us, that's all."

Jade can't resist prying a little. "Sounds like that might be true even when it's *not* the full moon."

"Hmm," Cat grunts noncommittally.

Jade glances over at her, slightly annoyed now. "Come on. We had to listen to you three fight and that's all you have to say?"

Cat sighs heavily. "It's just been a busy semester. We're all a little on edge. Well, except Sam, but the fact that she's *not* losing her mind annoys Carly and I."

"I can relate about the busy semester," Jade offers. That much is true. Already, she's learned things this semester that make her wish she could go back and re-shoot parts of the movie she shot over the summer that she's still working on editing in her free time (haha, what free time?). She's also discovered a small handful of people in her program she doesn't hate. It's going well, but it's exhausting.

“Yeah,” Cat replies. After a moment, she adds, “I *love* having Carly live with us, but trying to figure out how to make space for all three of us is harder than I thought.”

“How so?” Jade asks. She’s been in their apartment, of course, and though she hasn’t spent much time in either of the apartment’s two bedrooms, she understands the basic layout.

“It’s like every room is trying to be too many things to each of us,” Cat replies. “Like the bedroom, where we sleep, it’s also where Carly does most of her homework. So if I need a nap or something I can’t always go in there. And the other room, that’s where Sam tends to lounge around and watch TV if we’re not all watching something together in the living room but it’s also where I go if I’m working on music. So I guess it’s like the noise room? But if I’m making noise in there and Sam is making noise in the living room, then the whole house seems to turn into chaos. At least, according to Carly.”

“I mean, other than you not being able to take a nap, that seems reasonable enough.”

“I guess.” Cat sounds uncertain. “It just feels weird when the bedroom feels like *Carly’s* room. And then the other rooms don’t feel like they belong to anybody. Like, Sam and I are almost always together, but sometimes it feels like Carly’s only there sometimes.”

“Maybe you guys just have different expectations about what living together would be like,” Jade replies, because honestly? She thinks Carly’s instinct to find her own quiet corner of a chaotic apartment would be her preference. Much as she loves Tori, if she had to be around her all day, every day, Jade would probably lose her mind.

“Yeah,” Cat agrees quietly.

“Maybe you should talk to each other about it.”

“You think we haven’t?” Cat snaps. “You don’t know *everything*, Jade! It’s not like *you’ve* ever had two girlfriends!”

Jade’s own temper flares in response. “No, I haven’t, because it’s a *stupid idea!*”

“*You’re* a stupid idea!”

“What does that even *mean?*”

“I don’t know!” Cat huffs out an angry breath.

Jade stews, trying to decide if she should just leave Cat on the side of the road to fend for herself. But of course, she doesn’t. She’d only do that to Tori. A long time ago. Before she got all softened up by love.

“I’m sorry,” Cat finally says quietly. “I know you’re just trying to help.”

“Yeah, I won’t try to do *that* ever again,” Jade grunts.

“No, I appreciate it. I really do. You know I value your thoughts and advice. I wouldn’t be where I am if it weren’t for you.”

Jade looks askance at her. “Is that supposed to be a compliment when you’re *miserable*?”

“I’m *not* miserable!” Cat says firmly. “I’m *really* not. Living with Carly...our relationship is closer than ever. I love when we cook together, I love being close to her at night. She’s *really* good in bed. And with the two of us around, there’s usually someone to entertain Sam if one of us is busy.”

“Because a bored Sam is a Sam that’s about to get in trouble, I presume,” Jade drawls.

“Exactly.” Cat chuckles. “I love Sam to death, but she does not make good decisions.”

Jade wants to laugh, because she’s said much the same thing about Cat, many times before.

“I’m *not* miserable,” Cat repeats, very sternly. “We’re just stressed out from school and we’re still figuring out how to live together. I don’t think we realized it was going to be hard. Because we all love each other so much, and it feels like that should be enough.”

Jade knows what she means. She’s always felt that love should be enough, too. But it wasn’t with Beck, because their sexualities didn’t match up. And sometimes, after a long and stressful day at school, when she’s lying in bed, unable to sleep, and missing Tori so much it hurts, she worries that love won’t be enough for them, either.

The scariest feeling in the world is the idea that her heart could fail her. Not in the physical sense. But the idea that her outpouring of love, of cracking open her chest and letting Tori crawl inside the deepest, most vulnerable parts of her, might someday leave her empty, consumed from within, instead of warm and safe and full of hope.

“I shouldn’t have said two girlfriends was a stupid idea,” Jade admits, as close to an apology as she’s prepared to offer.

“I know,” Cat replies, understanding immediately.

## **December 2014**

Robbie is delighted to be back in Los Angeles for winter break, mostly because of Beck and his friends. He mostly enjoyed his first semester at Stanford; okay, he’s not *passionate* about the computer science program he’s trying to get into, but he finds it reasonably interesting. He met a few people who seem to like him enough to talk to him, though no one he’d really call a friend, quite yet. His roommate barely spends any time in the dorm room, which suits Robbie just fine. He and Freddie hung out a couple of times, and Freddie introduced Robbie to a few other people in the computer science program, but mostly, Robbie held his own. He’s at least proud of himself for that.

And, quietly, he spent some time at comedy clubs on some nights and weekends, fighting for a chance to perform. That isn’t something anyone knows about, not even Beck. Of course, his friends know about the times he’s performed here, in Los Angeles, and have even attended some of his short sets, but he hasn’t mentioned his pursuits in northern California. It seems

like a new beginning up there, a chance to be someone unknown. He wants a chance to rediscover who he might be as a comedian, with or without Rex, and without his friends' expectations limiting him.

But for now, he's back at home. Which, well, he spends more time in Beck's trailer than at his parents' house, but that's kind of what's been "home" for him for a while now. Living with his parents can be rough. At least Beck is able to live alongside his parents, separate, though reliant on their quiet support. Robbie has learned that support from his parents tends to be conditional and performative.

This month, Beck is on break from filming, but he's still fairly busy. He's doing a lot of press with some of his castmates, which luckily mostly means visiting different studios and soundstages locally instead of any travel. The show premieres in January and there's already favorable buzz from critics. Beck hasn't told most of their friends, because he's not one to brag, but he has disclosed to Robbie in private that there's a good possibility that the show will get to finish its full first season, and that they're considering expanding Beck's role if the season continues.

Which is...not surprising. Robbie has been watching his boyfriend's press, has been looking at the SplashFace hashtags, and it seems *pretty* obvious that if he plays his cards right and keeps being his easygoing, charming self, he could be a *very* popular heartthrob type with a rabid fanbase. This is absolutely not shocking. Beck is the sexiest man Robbie has ever known, since *long* before they ever started dating. Beck *still* gets plenty of unwanted attention from women when they go out places (and men, in certain places). And Robbie gets overlooked completely. He's used to it, to be honest. The fact that no one really looks at him is probably why Beck's sexuality doesn't seem to be public knowledge. Robbie has seen the fan speculations about it online, everything from men confidently stating he sets off their gaydar, women hoping he'll get a romantic arc with a man on the show, to other women scoffing that all the good-looking men can't be gay, but no one bringing any sort of hard evidence, not even a former Hollywood Arts classmate trying to gain a little notoriety by mentioning either Robbie *or* Jade.

So sometimes Robbie finds himself sitting alone in Beck's trailer, waiting for his boyfriend to come home from some event in which Beck smiles and runs a hand through his hair and all eyes are on him as he placidly but cheerfully explains how much fun he's had on set with his castmates, showing the world a total contrast to the moody, dark and brooding character he plays. He scrolls through Beck's Spectrogram, seeing all the splash and eggplant and hot face emojis on selfies taken at the gym with his absolutely *ripped* personal trainer, of photoshoots for his character, of pictures of him leaning against his classic car.

He sees, just as some corners of the internet see, a certain *chemistry* between Beck and Ethan, another actor. Beck has spoken fondly about Ethan, and Robbie has tried not to get jealous. Even so, Beck has assured him that he doesn't even know if Ethan is queer, and that even if he were, he would never cheat. Robbie *wants* to believe him.

But when it comes down to it...Robbie just can't see this lasting.

He's always known that Beck is too handsome for him. In the back of his mind, he's always felt like he's only ever been lucky enough to be Beck's boyfriend because he was *convenient*.

They were already friends, Robbie has never really been that good at hiding his own queerness, and...who better to be the first boyfriend for a nervous, newly-out young man than a geeky sissy boy whose devotion is all but *guaranteed*?

Not that he thinks Beck's desire to date him is for any *conscious* manipulative kind of reason. He just thinks he ticks all the boxes for a good starter boyfriend. Not too complicated. Inexperienced. Sweet.

But Beck is about to soar so far beyond him that Robbie can already see all the ways he's going to end up hurt.

Robbie decides the only thing to do is to enjoy the time they have left. Which means enjoying this winter break to the fullest. Because realistically, Robbie suspects this might be the last school break he spends in Beck's trailer.

So they throw parties, Robbie hangs on Beck's arm and enjoys the feeling of being his choice, currently. They laugh with their friends, they drink, they smoke. Everyone is ready to loosen up after what has apparently been a crazy semester for most of their friends; Robbie won't complain about his first semester, which hasn't been so bad, and quietly Freddie admits to him that he's had a *great* semester, and he's not about to complain about that, either.

Robbie spends a lot of time with Cat this break, too. It's great to see her; she's always been one of his closest friends. She's admitted that her semester was pretty rough, and also, she likes to get out of the apartment every once in a while, to give Sam and Carly some time to themselves, something they all three like to try to do for one another. And he and Cat can have fun doing just about anything, whether it's walking the Hollywood Walk of Fame and trying to read the stars upside down to make up new celebrity names, or pretending to follow a treasure map around the city by interpreting various graffiti symbols into directions. Cat always makes him realize that he's weird, because he likes her company so much, but not *too* weird, because he's not the one coming up with these crazy activities. He feels balanced, with her. It's part of why he fell for her, years ago.

He also spends some time with Freddie, who is doing a bit of couch surfing this winter break, sometimes even staying in Beck's trailer with them.

He *wants* to spend more time with Freddie at school, but it just didn't turn out that way last semester. Here, among their group of friends, it's a bit more acceptable to just hang out with him, so Robbie does.

Because he really *likes* Freddie. Not like *that*, as he's assured Beck (and himself) more times than he can count. But it's *impossible* not to like Freddie. He has *so much* in common with Robbie, but manages to be...*cool* and...*cute*.

He's everything Robbie wishes he could be, and sometimes he feels like if he gets just a little bit closer to Freddie, he'll figure out how to be a better version of himself.

Maybe even a version that deserves Beck.

Winter break arrives just in time to give Carly and her girlfriends a chance to cool off and remember why they'd wanted to all live together in the first place. They celebrate the end of the semester with tons of affection, and sex, and it feels *good* to want to just be hanging out in the living room with Sam and Cat again, no longer worried about focusing on homework, no longer isolating herself because the stress of everything makes her withdraw.

The apartment doesn't feel so small anymore. It feels *cozy* instead. Especially when Cat almost immediately starts putting up Christmas decorations as soon as school lets out.

It's great to see more friends again, to hang out in Beck's trailer and hear tidbits about how his work on set is going, for Freddie to be back in town. At this point, he's everybody's friend, so he's invited to stay on anyone's couch. He stays in their living room for a few days, then at Tori's (Tori makes sure it's at a time when Trina is out of town, for everyone's sake), then in Beck's trailer. He spends some time at Andre's grandmother's house, and Andre apologizes for how often he gets woken up in the night by her, but Freddie is unfazed, and explains he's used to waking up in the night because of his own mother (Carly shudders as she remembers the time she tried to stay over there, and the late night fire drills). Though Robbie generally stays with Beck, he and Freddie spend a night or two at his parents' house. And then Freddie even stays a few nights at Jade's, though she is *extremely* reluctant to have a houseguest, and tells Freddie that under no circumstances should he talk to her mother. Freddie, of course, has no intention of being rude, and later reports to Carly that he doesn't know why Jade said that, because her mother is a perfectly nice, lovely woman.

A few weeks into winter break is Christmas, and she and Freddie both have plans to go home to Seattle for the holiday. Carly is planning to stay longer than last year, because Spencer will be around, and Freddie reluctantly agrees to stay the same amount of time, reasoning that if he spends time with his mother now, he'll probably be able to wrangle spending spring break in California.

Also, Carly's dad is supposed to show up for Christmas itself, and that makes her even more eager to go home for Christmas.

Though, she is a little sad to miss celebrating Christmas with her girlfriends. They do a "girlfriend Christmas" before Carly leaves town, in which they exchange gifts with Carly (though clearly Sam and Cat are both saving gifts for each other for Christmas itself, which makes sense, but Carly feels disappointed that she'll miss the reveal of those gifts, too), and she and Cat make a ham for dinner. It's great, and she knows they're all doing their best to make it special, but it doesn't *quite* feel like Christmas. Despite the decorations and the traditions, there's something magical about the day *itself* that can't be replicated.

Carly tries to look on the bright side and remember that she gets to spend Christmas with her *actual* family, something that isn't an option or really wanted for Sam and Cat.

She and Freddie drive up to Seattle together, in another one of those obscenely long car trips that leaves them slap-happy and exhausted by the time they make it to their respective apartments, where Carly almost immediately goes to sleep.

The next morning, she mostly hangs out with Spencer, who fills her in on how he's been able to get a few more paid sculpting jobs because of the positive reception of his work at

Hollywood Arts. It's mostly involved travel, though. Which is fine, Spencer doesn't mind traveling, and Socko is usually down to go with him. But it does make Carly wonder if it makes a lot of sense for Spencer to continue living in such a big apartment by himself. Spencer doesn't say anything like that directly, but the thought makes Carly sort of...sad and nostalgic.

Spencer is preparing to go out to do some last-minute Christmas and grocery shopping, and while he bustles around on the first floor changing his clothes and making lists, Carly wanders upstairs. She looks around her bedroom, wonders if there's anything in it she should try to bring back with her, if she risks losing everything else in it if she doesn't. But to be honest, though it's a familiar, warm, and lovely place...it doesn't quite feel like *hers*, in exactly that sort of way she's been trying to pinpoint since she moved into the studio apartment she never decorated. She *loves* it, but it isn't *her* style. To be honest, it's mostly Spencer's.

But it's when she travels up to the third floor, to the *iCarly* loft, that she feels a big pang of loss.

It's one thing to think about never being able to go home to her childhood bedroom again. It's another thing entirely to consider the loss of this room. The room that cemented the best friendship between her, Sam, and Freddie that endures to this day. The room in which they cultivated the web show that changed their lives.

The room where she and Sam made love for the first time, under a new moon, surrounded by the set that essentially was built as a testament to their connection. A lot of what's in the loft feels like Spencer's taste, too, but it also feels like *Carly's* in a way little else in the house does.

She sinks down onto the beanbag chair and closes her eyes, thinking about Sam, until a knock on the studio door brings her out of her reverie. "What?" she asks, looking over her shoulder, expecting Spencer.

It's Freddie. "I caught Spencer as he was leaving, he said you were up here." He steps into the room. "Feels kinda weird to knock on the studio door, to be honest," he comments.

She smiles. It's a little wan, because she's been lost in some kind of grim thoughts, but she welcomes the interruption. "Had to get away from your mom?" she asks sympathetically.

Freddie groans. "I keep *telling* her I don't need her special honey and goat milk soap for my face, I have my hygiene under control."

Carly considers this. "You do have really nice skin, actually."

"Thank you." He rolls his eyes and flops down onto the adjacent beanbag chair. "I guess that's one point in her favor. All the weird health shit she tried on me helped me figure out what really works for me."

They're both quiet for a moment as they look around the space. "Weird to be in here, huh?" Carly finally acknowledges.



“Yeah. Especially without Sam.” He looks around. “I’m surprised Spencer hasn’t turned this into an art studio by now.”

“He has a whole house to be his art studio,” Carly sighs, because now she’s back to thinking about how unlikely it is that her dad will be willing to keep paying for an apartment this big.

“That’s true.” He tilts his head to the side. “I guess it’s nice, in a way. To feel like if we ever needed to, we could just...come back.”

“It is,” Carly agrees, though she knows that Sam, at least, will *never* be coming back to Seattle, so it’s kind of moot.

Freddie’s next question takes such a turn that Carly feels like she gets whiplash. “So, is it weird to be...bisexual, but dating two women?”

Carly blinks. No one has ever asked her that before. Nor has it ever really been a consideration for her. “No?” she answers, tone indicating she doesn’t even understand why Freddie would ask this.

“I just mean, like, if you like guys too, then—”

“It’s no different than being bisexual and dating *one* person,” Carly says sharply. “I just happen to be dating two. I’m not trying to fill some kind of *quota* by dating them, they’re just who I fell in love with.”

“Right. Okay, I get it,” Freddie says quickly.

Carly gets a sinking feeling as she wonders whether Freddie had been asking something she *really* hopes he wasn’t. “Freddie,” she starts slowly, “You’re not suggesting that you and I should—”

“No!” he answers quickly. “No, believe me, I’ve been over you for a long time.”

“Then why the *hell* would you ask me something like that? Are you just *nosy*?”

“Well, I guess a little,” he admits. “But that’s not really why.”

“Then *why*?”

“Because,” he starts, and takes a breath. “I’ve been trying to figure out how to tell you this for a long time.”

“Tell me *what*?” Carly asks warily. Nothing about this can be good. At least she knows he’s not about to say that he’s still in love with her, but what if he never got over Sam? Or what if he’s in love with Cat now? Or what if—

“I think I’m kinda bi, too.”

It’s the *last* thing Carly ever expected to hear and she doesn’t answer for a long moment as she just stares at him in shock. “Oh—oh my god!” As it slowly starts to process, though, she

starts smiling, and her dumbfounded brain freeze is replaced by *joy*. “That’s *great!* Congratulations!”

He doesn’t look as thrilled. “Thanks.” He smiles weakly. “I think.”

“No, but this is *great!* Have you *been* with a guy yet?” she asks eagerly.

“No.” He reddens visibly and avoids her eyes.

“Have you been—” Carly starts to ask before realizing it probably isn’t her business whether or not Freddie is a virgin.

“Yes, I’ve been with one girl, it was a hookup, it was *awkward*, we’re friendly but she didn’t seem interested in hooking up again and honestly, I don’t blame her.” He tells her all of this very fast, then adds, “And I *don’t* want to talk about it any more.”

“Right. Sorry. I shouldn’t have—I’m just excited for you, because being queer is *awesome*.”

“It’s different for men,” Freddie says quietly. “Harder.”

“You sound like Spe—” Carly cuts herself off with a hard wince, unable to *believe* she’d almost outed her brother that way.

But Freddie barely reacts. “I sound like Spencer because Spencer is right,” he says tonelessly.

“Wait,” Carly stares. “How do you know...?”

Freddie looks at her. “Besides you, Spencer is the only other person who knows. And even he, I kinda—I don’t know.”

“Okay, what does *that* mean?” Carly demands.

Freddie rubs his face. “Look, when you and Sam left, Spencer felt like all I had for a while. Like, sure, Gibby was around, but Gibby is...Gibby. And I was here a lot, and the summer between high school and college I was, like, *always* here. And I...told Spencer I had a crush on him. Because...” he laughs a little. “That wasn’t even really *new*, but I was eighteen, I was going to college, and Spencer had always been *so nice* to me, I thought maybe...”

“You were into my *brother*?” Carly asks, slightly horrified.

“Is that so weird?”

“*Yes!*”

“Well I’m sorry!” Freddie shouts. “But I was! Besides, it doesn’t matter because he wasn’t into me. He still sees me as a kid,” he says, somewhat bitterly.

“Good,” Carly comments.

“Thanks a *lot*,” Freddie sighs. “But at least...I had someone to talk to. Spencer told me he was bi, too, but talked about what that meant for him. He tried to give me advice. And honestly, I was so scared and embarrassed that I told him I didn’t think I was actually bi, that I thought I just got a bro crush on him and it was no big deal. He seemed to accept that.”

“A bro crush?” Carly rolls her eyes. “Guys will go to any lengths to avoid admitting they’re even a little queer.”

“Can you *blame* us?” Freddie shoots back. “If I kiss a guy, women think I’m *contaminated* somehow, like I have a *gayness* that’s going take over my life. If I sleep with a woman, gay guys think I’m gross and can’t be trusted. I can’t win.”

Carly thinks this sounds a little bleak. And a lot like what Spencer said. She wonders how much of Freddie’s conflict with his sexuality is because Spencer painted a worst-case scenario picture for him, because her brother, too, is *clearly* conflicted. “There are women who think it’s hot. And other bi men,” she tells him.

“Yeah, well, they’re not exactly breaking down my door,” Freddie grumbles.

Carly wants to ask what Freddie calls the way Robbie constantly flirts with him, but instead just says, “Can I at least be happy for you?”

Freddie smiles slightly. “Sure. At least one of us should be.”

“Why did you even tell me if you’re so upset about this?”

“Because I’m tired of hiding,” Freddie replies. “Not that I want anyone else to know yet,” he adds quickly. “But, just, I tried to hide it, even from myself, after it didn’t go well telling Spencer. I told myself it really *was* just a special weird friend crush on Spencer and that it didn’t mean anything. But it’s not just him. And I thought maybe telling someone who would get it might be the first step to trying to figure out how to embrace this.”

Carly decides her best move is to literally embrace *him*. He hugs back tightly, clearly appreciative.

“You know,” he tells her when she pulls away. “What you said that one time, about closeted queer people seeking each other out before anyone is out...that really *shook* me at the time. It felt like *everybody* could see through me. And every time I tried to play the token straight when we were out with our friends—you know, other than Andre—it just felt so *fake*. But I wasn’t ready yet. I kept hoping someone would just figure it out, but...” he trails off.

“The thing about coming out,” Carly tells him sympathetically, “is that generally, no one is going to do it for you.”

“Yeah. I get that,” he says quietly. He shakes his head. “On the one hand, I’m *terrified*, but on the other hand, I don’t know why I *care*. It’s not like most people are dicks about stuff like this anymore. At least, most people our age.”

“It’s always scary to put a target on your back. Even if the one who’s going to fire at it the most is probably going to be you,” Carly replies.

He nods slowly. “That’s deep.”

“Yeah, that’s what coming out will get you. Really deep thoughts about queer shame. But that’s balanced out with queer sex, which is *awesome*.”

Freddie blushes again. Carly thinks that there is definitely someone out there who will find this level of shyness totally endearing. “Right. I’m sure,” he mutters.

# Love

## February 2015

Cat thinks it's nice of Valentine's Day to fall on a Saturday so that she, Sam, and Carly actually have time to celebrate it. Not surprisingly, this semester is a lot like the last one, in terms of keeping them busy; or, at least, it is for her and Carly. Carly and Tori are starting to take some upper-level classes in their major, whereas Cat is finishing up some of the general education classes she's been least excited to take and finalizing all the necessary applications and paperwork to hopefully transfer to UCLA next semester. She finally decided she wants to study theater, a different branch in the program from what Tori and Carly are studying (Carly is focusing on production and digital media, Tori is focusing on acting, but Cat thinks she wants to focus on set and costume design), but they'll have some potential overlap. Cat's father has stressed that she'd better be certain about her choice, because he doesn't want to pay more for her to change her mind and pursue music in a year, but Cat is sure. Perhaps like Tori, for Cat, the glamour of the idea of a music career was sullied a bit by an inside look at Neutronium Records.

The typical mild school stress tensions actually ease between all three of them the week before Valentine's Day, probably because they have something to look forward to. Perhaps it's good timing, too, because it is still early in the semester, right around the time when Cat is getting used to the rhythm of her days and the content of her classes, and before any big projects are due.

Maybe everything is just coming together to allow them to have a really nice week.

The only issue with Valentine's Day is that it's really only one day. And as much as Cat wants to be able to joke that it's *her* day and so she should be the focus, the reality is, they all have multiple relationships they need to give attention to on this romantic holiday: her relationship with Sam, her relationship with Carly, Sam and Carly's relationship, and the relationship between all three of them.

Though they haven't all been together for quite a year yet, the reality of the distinctions between their relationships is something they're still learning as they go, something that was especially brought into focus when they all started living together. Though all the relationships are equally valued and equally important, they fulfill different needs for one another in various ways. Learning to identify and appreciate these differences helps them grow deeper. It's important to Cat to honor these distinctions, and to give Sam and Carly the space to do the same between themselves.

So Valentine's Day starts out with Cat and Carly waking up before Sam, as usual. They spend the morning together cooking breakfast, pulling out all the stops, collaborating on recipes to create something special (breakfast casserole packed with spicy sausage and veggies, raspberry rhubarb muffins, slices of bread topped with pesto, prosciutto, avocado and grapefruit, and ricotta banana pancakes). They'd talked about each making a breakfast for the other person, but had agreed that collaborating is more fun. They cook and sing together, then

eat together at the dining room table (this apartment doesn't have a dining nook, another drawback). When Sam finally gets up, she can finish the leftovers, but at this time of the morning, it's just the two of them, enjoying food and music and one another's company.

Having the opportunity to be *domestic* with each other in a way that feels special is a treat. They often take turns handling household meals, unless Sam gets tapped to go get takeout or cook the occasional meal (because she *can* cook acceptably well, she just doesn't enjoy it much). But it's the special meals that invite collaboration. It emphasizes, for them, how important the development of their domestic relationship has been. It's something they lacked, something that had once been a point of contention when Sam had been dating both of them and they were mutually jealous of one another. But now, they celebrate the fact that living together has brought them closer, even if it isn't always perfect, even if it sometimes causes strife and hurt feelings. They remember the things that brought them together, the singing and cooking with Nona. They celebrate each other.

Carly sits back against her chair with a groan. "I can't believe how *good* that turned out." She gestures with her fork toward the egg casserole. "Nona really outdid herself with that recipe."

"Your idea to add the gouda cheese *really* made it perfect," Cat tells her fondly.

Carly shakes her head. "I just know where to find good ingredients. *You're* the one who knows how to put it all together."

"You always sell yourself short. Your cooking turns out amazing because you *care*."

Carly smiles shyly, "You know, when that all started, I mostly cared about impressing *you*."

Cat feels warm as she remembers the times they'd visited Nona, when things were starting to come together for them. How she'd struggled with her feelings, how forgiving Carly for the fact that Sam loved her, too, had only opened her heart back up to Carly, rekindled the deep love that had been brewing within Cat for a while. She'd had no idea that Carly had been starting to feel the same way, and it's always flattering to hear about Carly's burgeoning feelings. "Well," Cat purrs. "You *certainly* impressed me."

She can tell her mild innuendo lands by the way Carly shifts in her seat and her dark eyes sear with pleasure. She reaches out to hold Cat's hand, and the fire of lust slowly burns down to just a simmering, leaving them content to be in each other's company, first thing in the morning.

Cat thinks that Carly's sunny warmth is the perfect way to start the day. "Thank you for waking up early with me," she tells Carly gratefully. "I know you're not always a morning person."

Carly grins ruefully and nods her agreement. She has no problem getting up early, something that's an actual struggle for Sam, but she'll also happily sleep in late whenever the opportunity presents itself. But her response is simple. "I'd do anything for a little bit more time with you."

Sam wakes up in the late morning and absolutely devours the remains of the delicious breakfast Cat and Carly made, because it's *incredible*. While she focuses on food, the two of them focus on each other, cuddling and kissing on the couch with their cups of coffee, and Sam does her best to wake up, because she has plans for the rest of the day.

As morning begins to turn to afternoon, it's time for Sam and Cat to head out together. It's unseasonably warm for February, such that the air whipping past them on Sam's motorcycle feels refreshing, as they ride into the city. The goal is to take a completely spontaneous journey, because from the moment she met Cat, their relationship has been an adventure.

She feels Cat on the motorcycle behind her, arms wrapped around her waist, giddy as Sam takes her for a ride. Sometimes Sam chooses when and where to turn, sometimes Cat points or calls directions in her ear. There's no destination. Only a journey. Much like the journey they're on together, one where they've continued to learn and grow, where they've held each other's hands in difficult moments and kept each other's secrets and became each other's families when it felt like they had no one else. That their relationship is strong enough to let someone else in is only because they've continued to love each other as fiercely as the day they first fell in love. Whenever that was. Sam sure can't pinpoint it.

Eventually, their journey takes them to a tall parking garage. Sam drives to the very top, where they're treated to a panoramic view of the entire city. They lean against the half-wall that separates them from the edge of the concrete tower and gaze off toward the mountains that jut up against the valley floor, smudged by the perpetual layer of smog in the atmosphere. It strikes Sam just how much Los Angeles, for all its bad air and high prices and shallow people, has come to feel like her home. She loves the beach, she loves the food, she loves Shadow Creek Park and where it sits just up against the forests and mountains. And she loves Cat, who is a Los Angeles girl through and through, with expensive taste but who has the biggest heart of anyone Sam has ever known. Except, maybe, for Carly. But it's impossible to quantify the depths of love and empathy from two people she loves with her entire self.

Cat has been wearing a backpack on this motorcycle journey, and she takes it off now and fishes around inside. "I brought you this," she tells Sam, presenting her with a big tupperware container.

"I was wondering what we were going to do about lunch," Sam comments. She opens the container and feels like she immediately starts salivating when she sees what's inside. "Meatballs?" she gasps.

"Mmhmm," Cat smiles. Sam sees that she has a container of her own, filled with vegetables and ranch dip. "All for you," she tells Sam.

Sam feels like she might cry. "How did you know?" she asks. It's semi-rhetorical; when *isn't* Sam in the mood for meatballs?

But Cat has an answer. "Meatballs helped us heal from the time I hurt you the most," she states quietly, her voice full of regret.

It's an utterly ridiculous statement, in any other context. But Sam remembers Yay Day, and how much it had hurt to think that Cat cared so little about her. She's glad that the notion has been so thoroughly dismissed, that she knows without a doubt how deeply Cat's love runs. "You're not having any?" she asks, eyeing Cat's veggies critically.

"I wanted them to be all for you."

Much as Sam loves the idea, she can't quite allow herself to be selfish. "We'll share them," she decides. "And give me some of those carrot sticks."

Maybe Sam absolutely ends up eating the *vast* majority of the meatballs, but it still feels good to share something she enjoys so much with someone she loves.

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When Sam and Cat come home, windswept from their motorcycle ride, Carly thinks they both look so beautiful, smell so wonderful and free. But right now, her eyes are drawn to Sam. She's eager for their opportunity to spend some time together.

"Let's take my car," Carly suggests as they head out toward the parking lot. While Carly can certainly appreciate the appeal of a motorcycle ride, she generally prefers to take a car.

Sam's eyes brighten at the suggestion. Which is another reason Carly decided they should drive a car: Sam doesn't get to drive Carly's car very often, but she clearly *loves* it. "You're gonna let me drive Vin Diesel?"

Carly laughs. "I figure he deserves some love on a day like today, too."

Sam looks dreamy-eyed. "I get to drive my two favorite vehicles on the same day. And I *don't* have to drive Nona's car."

Carly tilts her head to the side. "I still think you're overlooking some of the perks of that car."

"Yeah, yeah, big back seat, we've all banged it out back there." Sam slides into the driver's seat and moves the seat forward so her feet can actually reach the pedals. Sometimes Carly kinda forgets that Sam is so short. The amount of swagger she has feels like it belongs to someone much taller.

Sam doesn't actually know where they're going, so Carly guides her with directions from her PearPhone, until they pull into a vast parking lot in front of an even bigger building.

"The Northridge Mall?" Sam asks skeptically as she steps out of the car.

Carly grins. "We're going to go do a few things we haven't done for *a while*."

"If you say so," Sam answers.

Carly has to consult a mall directory and map to figure out where they're going, but she guides Sam to their first stop: a Groovy Smoothie.



“Oh, man,” Sam’s gaze softens as she takes in the sign. “I haven’t had one of their smoothies in a *long* time.”

“Me, neither. And *we* haven’t had one since Seattle.”

Carly pays for two smoothies (Sam gets Jalapeno Blitz and Carly gets Strawberry Splat) and a large order of fries, so Sam can be an absolute food anarchist and dip her fries in her smoothie. They meander out with their smoothies, strolling through the mall, which is just as depressing as expected for a mall in the Valley in 2015. Even when they used to go to the mall as teenagers, though, it was already a dying enterprise. So it’s not *that* different.

“It tastes different from what I remember,” Carly comments as she sips her smoothie.

“I’ve gotta say, a mall location with a bored high schooler running the whole show does *not* have nearly the same charm as T-Bo’s franchise.”

“I wonder if the parent company knows how many liberties T-Bo takes with the product. I don’t think I realized how many of his flavors weren’t traditional until I went to a location in Yakima with my granddad.”

“Well, nobody had better tell them, he’s doing something special there,” Sam says fondly.

“Agreed,” Carly nods. Next time she goes to Seattle she’ll have to pay him a visit. He’d closed the shop between Christmas and the New Year when she was last there. Someday, she’ll be there when it’s open.

“Where to now?” Sam asks.

“We’ll take our time. We won’t be able to take our drinks inside.”

Sam side-eyes her, but it doesn’t take her long to finish her smoothie and most of the fries. Carly handles the rest of the fries, but doesn’t finish her smoothie. Still, Sam is right. It’s not the same. She doesn’t mind tossing it out.

She next guides Sam to Build a Bra.

“I haven’t been here in…” Sam trails off.

“Yeah. Me neither.” Carly grins. “Want to go build a new bra?”

“Heck yeah. I could use a new bra.”

“I know.”

Sam shoots her a scowl, but doesn’t argue.

They work on their bras side by side, but Carly can tell Sam is focused on her own project, and trying to make the most sturdy and functional bra that she possibly can. Which is par for the course, with Sam.

Carly's focus is a little different.

When they finish, they go back to the dressing rooms to try them on. When the attendant wanders away, Carly sneaks into Sam's dressing room with her.

"I'm in—hey! Oh!" Sam covers her chest, but then lowers her arms when she realizes it's Carly. "I almost punched you."

"You did not, you were too worried about your boobs." She pauses to listen, to make sure Sam's cry didn't alert any employees, but it seems safe. "We should show each other our bras."

"Sure," Sam replies, and quickly pulls on her bra, then spins to show Carly, holding out her arms. "Ta-da!"

Carly smiles. "Titanium hooks, anti-slip straps, memory foam. It's very you."

"Well, I've got to haul these things around and some extra support doesn't hurt." She hefts one of her breasts. It's *very* distracting. Sam has to prompt, "Well? You gonna show me yours before we get kicked out of here?"

"Right." Carly pulls off her t-shirt to show Sam.

Sam's mouth drops open. "Oh."

"You like it?"

She swallows. "You never built a bra like *that* before."

"I wasn't brave enough. Also, I *definitely* didn't want Spencer to know if I had a bra like this."

Sam winces. "Okay, good point." She goes right back to staring at Carly's chest.

"I'm guessing you like it?"

"Uhh," is Sam's response.

Carly smirks. "I'm going to wear it home." She winks and leaves Sam's dressing room.

"I can't wait to take it off you," she hears Sam mutter behind her.

They head back home from the mall in Carly's car. As they navigate traffic on the freeways, Sam reaches her hand over to squeeze Carly's, a reassuring, affectionate action that feels so natural, Carly almost can't believe there was a year there where they never spoke, almost two where they never kissed.

Her domestic morning with Cat celebrated what is new between them, and the fact that they're still building a foundation for the longevity of their relationship. But her afternoon with Sam is much more about the deep history between them. The close friendship that led to

something more. They've known each other so well and for so long, sometimes it's nice to remember where they came from, to honor the long road their relationship has taken.

And right now, their relationship has taken them to a shared apartment with their shared girlfriend, where the three of them are going to enjoy a pasta dinner, a walk along the beach where they can all enjoy the cool sea air and the sight of the sliver of the moon in the clear night sky, followed by an evening full of sex in their large bed as they bask in the pleasure that only all three of them together can achieve.

Oh, and Sam *does* manage to get to remove Carly's new, sexy bra before Cat does.

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Valentine's Day feels a lot like a trip to Shadow Creek Park, in the sense that she and Jade both do everything they possibly can to clear their schedules for it. It's early enough in the semester that it's a reasonable ask, but it's also already been a busy enough semester that getting to spend the day together feels like a special treat.

If she thinks about it too much, it makes her sad. So she tries to just focus on getting to spend a really great day with Jade.

It's always hard because Jade's classes tend to start a week or even two weeks before her own. Those extra days mean she's already laser focused on her semester by the time Tori is just getting started and figuring out how to best manage her time. For this reason, the first few weeks Tori was in school, they barely saw each other, except for Shadow Creek Park in the middle of the week in early February. But that hardly counts as intimate time with Jade.

Valentine's Day feels like the first time they get to spend together since Jade started classes about a month ago.

They both spend most of Friday working on homework, just spending time together in Jade's room, barely speaking, listening to music and working. They're up late, and by the time they get in bed, they don't have energy for much more than cuddling and actually sleeping. This is what the time they've been able to spend together since Jade went back to school has looked like thus far.

Though they're planning to spend the day together, they haven't actually discussed what they're going to do. No one had any time to plan ahead this year. Once Jade has had enough coffee in the morning, she asks Tori, "So. What do you want to do?"

Tori considers this. "I don't really care as long as I get to be with you," she tells Jade honestly.

"That's stupid. You must want to do *something*."

Tori raises her eyebrows. "Fine, then. I want to go hiking in Runyon Canyon."

"Be serious!" Jade demands.

Tori *would* go hiking if it was something Jade would ever consider, but in this case, it isn't a serious suggestion. She smiles at Jade. "Why don't we start out with watching a movie?"

Jade looks suspicious, but it's a fact that she never passes up a chance to watch a movie. Tori even lets her choose.

Jade ends up choosing *Clue*, which isn't even something she has to watch for class, and they have the now rare experience of lying on Jade's bed and watching a movie together, purely for fun.

"What now?" Tori asks when the movie is over.

Jade takes a contemplative sip of coffee, then leans over to kiss Tori. Tori feels the nerves of her whole body awaken, light up, flare to life as Jade's hand strokes her jaw. The gentlest touch from Jade can make her quiver, because she knows how much it means for Jade to be tender with her, for Jade's hard edges to melt, her ferocity to turn to a different sort of intensity.

"God, you're so beautiful," Tori sighs as Jade kisses her neck, and it's both a statement of absolute truth, and a seduction, because she knows how much those words, her validation, affects Jade. She feels the way Jade grasps at the hair at the back of her head in response, making Tori bite back a moan. They've been together for almost three years at this point. It feels like Tori knows every place Jade likes to be touched, every word that makes her breath catch. But there's nothing rote or routine about this sex, despite how easily they fall into established patterns. No, right now, sex for them feels like water in a desert, a cleansing, satisfying, quenching intimacy that they both have wanted and missed so badly that it feels like an ache inside Tori that won't be eased until Jade is literally inside of her to replace it.

It feels like they spend hours rolling around together, their bodies connecting in every way possible, flesh sliding together, breathing each other's air. Jade's eyes are blue-green fire, her adoration as intense and all-consuming as any scowl she wears, her lips taste like coffee and copper, from all the times she anxiously gnaws on them, her hands are strong and confident where the rest of her body is so soft and inviting. Jade is a thousand contradictions that Tori has put together like a difficult but rewarding puzzle. To have Jade's love means everything.

When they finally seem to reach a natural stopping point, they hold each other on the tangle of sheets. Jade gently takes one of Tori's fingers into her mouth and sucks on it, which almost revs Tori right back up, but instead of any words of seduction, what flies out of her mouth is, "I've missed you."

Jade stops sucking on her finger and kisses her palm instead, then brings Tori's hand close to her chest. "Me, too," she answers, wistful, melancholy.

"Last semester was so hard, and I know that this one might be—"

"I know," Jade interrupts.

"I just want you to know that I'm always going to try," Tori promises her. "No matter what happens, I'm never giving up on us."

“Tori. I know,” Jade repeats. She’s not shutting it down. She’s just agreeing, in her simple, direct way. “It sucks to feel like I never get to see you, but it’s temporary.”

She makes it sound so simple. “At least there’s always the full moon.”

“Yeah,” Jade agrees, though her tone is reluctant.

“Jade, if you ever need me to cancel with our friends so that you and I have time—”

“It won’t come to that.”

Tori nods, feeling relieved, because of how important that monthly outing is for her own stress management. “Just promise me one thing?”

“Anything.”

“That we’ll...talk. If things get too hard, if we start to drift apart, if we need to make a change. That you’ll talk to me.”

Jade gazes back at her, expression inscrutable. It takes a long time before she says, “I promise.”

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They’re both ravenously hungry after all that sex, and Tori is quickly on the phone with Nozu, sweet-talking Kwakoo into putting together a special carryout order for them on the busiest day of the year for restaurants. Jade grins as she hears the flattery Tori puts into her voice as she requests extra soy sauce and wasabi to go with their sushi rolls, two soups and an edamame starter as well as dessert. It’s better when Tori doesn’t try to wheedle or manipulate. If she just leads with her own natural kindness, she gets results.

Jade still hasn’t put on any clothes, though she knows they’ll have to get dressed to go pick up their order shortly. But she’s staring at the ceiling, the one she painted dark blue and covered with glow-in-the-dark stars when she was eleven, and ruminates on the conversation she just had with Tori.

It wasn’t the act of making a promise to Tori that had been difficult for her. Tori’s request had been totally reasonable, and what Jade would want anyway. She has no intention of losing Tori, no matter how hard things get.

No, what troubles her is that Tori felt like they needed this conversation at all. When they’re so early into the semester. When they’re not even halfway through college. When they still have so much time to go before they can even start to figure out their next steps, the jobs they’ll take, whether it makes sense to stay in Los Angeles, whether they can afford their own place, whether, which, when, how—it’s too much. It’s too early to be worrying about not making it. They have less time together than ever, but it’s not a surprise; it’s where their school workload has slowly been leading them. It’s been gradual. No shock to the system. Enough time to accommodate, to acclimate, to learn how to make the most of their time together while they have it.

She's certain Tori meant to reassure her. And maybe it's a good thing, ultimately, that Tori is trying to address something that's not ideal before it becomes a bigger problem. The fact that they have less time for each other than ever is just that: a fact. And maybe it's a good thing to know that they're both aware of it, they both see it as a problem, and they're both committed to just...getting the fuck through it until they can really start their lives together.

Jade tries to reassure herself. Maybe it's her own anxiety peeking through. Whenever she'd try to have any kind of serious talk with Beck when they were dating, he would blow her off or offer only the most basic reassurances, whether it had been about his fidelity or their future or his feelings about her. It had been maddening. It had made her feel like she was the only one worried about their relationship, the only one invested in it.

When it comes down to it...that's probably true. Beck had been deep within his own struggle, trying to understand why his romantic relationship with his best friend *wasn't* something he was all that concerned about. Even after three years with Tori—about the same length, off and on, as her relationship with Beck—she still sometimes falls back on old habits, old fears, old insecurities.

But Tori *will* talk to her. Tori entrusts her with her secrets. Tori is as committed to this as Jade is, and the fact that she's willing to display it, as frighteningly vulnerable as it makes them both feel to confront the fear that despite their best efforts, despite the depth of their love, they *might not make it* because of circumstances beyond their control, because of goals they both need to achieve, that they could be in the same city together and *still* feel so far apart...

Jade chooses to love Tori for her courage, and to hope she'll have some of her own, if things ever get that bad.

And after a drive to get sushi, a picnic in the backyard of the house from *The Scissoring* (something that Tori mildly freaks out about, but they get away with it; like everyone else, the owners of the house are probably out celebrating the holiday), they head back to Jade's house, where they fall back into bed together. Jade wants to make every moment count. Jade wants the memory of Tori to be seared into her skin.

"Harder," she growls at Tori, as her fingers move inside of her. If there's pain with her pleasure, maybe it'll stave off the pain of missing Tori, at least for a little while.

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Beck's filming schedule actually gives him the perfect amount of time off for Valentine's Day; he wraps by Thursday of that week, so he has Friday to travel up to Stanford, Saturday to spend with Robbie and Sunday to get back home so he can prepare to get up early and work another week on set. It's gratifying work, but it's also *exhausting*. The show began airing last month and performed well, so they're already greenlit to finish out their first season. They've just started filming the back half of the first season, and his character has more screen time, so he's on set almost every day. He loves it, but it's been an adjustment.

When he finds out his schedule for the week of Valentine's Day, he begins to prepare his trailer for the journey, arranges to borrow his uncle's truck, and he and Robbie text excitedly about how they're going to see each other soon.

Beck wakes up early on Friday morning. It's partly because he's become acclimated to the early schedule working on set requires, and partly because he's excited. He tries to fall back to sleep, but it's just not happening, so he gets up and prepares to start his drive. He texts Robbie when he leaves, and Robbie responds, a little surprised by how early Beck is leaving, but tells Beck to let him know his ETA and Robbie will be ready to meet him.

After his long drive, only made more difficult by the fact that he's hauling his trailer, Beck navigates through the Stanford campus to Robbie's dorm, where he's been instructed to meet Robbie. The trailer turns heads, which isn't surprising, and Robbie, most of all, looks shocked. Beck parks in front of the dorm and prepares to get out to greet his boyfriend, but Robbie jumps up into the truck's cab before he can.

"This is a fire lane, we can't park here," Robbie says in an agitated voice. "I didn't know you were bringing *that*!" He points behind them.

"Hello to you, too," Beck replies, mildly sarcastic. He wants to kiss Robbie, but Robbie clearly is more concerned about the truck and trailer right now, so Beck presses his lips together and pulls away from the curb. "We talked about this, though. That I should bring this when I visit you so we have someplace private and familiar to go."

"Turn here," Robbie instructs, then says, "We thought that last semester, but by now I know that my roommate is never around. He has a girlfriend he's always staying with. I told him you were coming to town and he'll avoid the room and text me if he needs to come back for anything."

"You told him you have a boyfriend?" Beck asks, a little surprised. Robbie has always seemed a bit anxious of and intimidated by his roommate, and Beck assumed that Robbie would stay closeted around a guy like that.

"Sure," Robbie says easily. "He didn't care."

Maybe it sometimes really is that simple.

Things start to feel a little better once Robbie guides Beck to the visitor's parking area and puts a visitor's parking permit on his mirror. Beck isn't quite legally parked, because of the length of the trailer behind him, but he's in the corner of the parking lot, where fewer cars are parked, and they both hope it won't be an issue. Beck feels like being all the way over here just makes the trailer an even *more* private option for them, but Robbie seems to think they're just going to leave the trailer here. Beck doesn't love that. This is his *home*, and he doesn't want it to get damaged or vandalized.

But at least now, when he turns to smile at Robbie, Robbie smiles back at him eagerly. "It's good to see you," Beck tells him warmly.

"I've missed you so much," Robbie replies, and finally, they're kissing. Beck could almost laugh with relief. It feels like something he's been missing for so long is finally settling into place once again.

Robbie pulls away after a long moment, grinning, but then checks his watch. “Oh, gosh, I’m supposed to meet some people for a group project meeting in half an hour.”

Beck frowns. “It’s Friday. I thought you were done with class by now.”

“I know, normally I am, but this was when we could all meet,” Robbie says apologetically. “You could wait in my dorm until I’m done?”

“Is there anywhere I can get something to eat? I didn’t really stop for a real lunch.”

“The dining halls will open for dinner in a couple of hours. There are some places where you can pay cash but I don’t think I have time to show you.”

Beck is disappointed, but he understands. Or he tries to. “It’s alright, I have some snacks in my trailer. I’ll be here, just let me know when you’re ready to see me.”

Robbie’s meeting goes a lot longer than Beck expects, to the point that he texts Robbie a few times to ask if he’s finished. At first Robbie doesn’t reply, but eventually he apologizes and tells Beck they’re running longer than expected, that they have more to cover than they all thought. Beck does his best to be patient, but he’s hungry, and he only has so many snacks he’s willing to eat in his trailer. He considers contacting Freddie to see if he can show him where to get a meal, but he wants to eat with Robbie.

Finally, Robbie finishes his school work, and he and Beck go to get dinner. It’s late enough that the dining hall is not crowded in the least, but there’s still ample food to choose from, and it’s all delicious. And technically free; Robbie has meal plan dollars he can spend to cover Beck’s dinner.

Beck notices that he’s catching the attention of some of the other students. He does his best to ignore this. He’s used to unwanted attention, especially from women; somehow, even now that he’s known that he’s gay and has been quietly open about it for years (though it’s still not something he’s spoken to any media about, at the advice of his management team, to avoid being pigeonholed and losing out on potential work), he still doesn’t seem to set off the gaydar of the public at large. He wishes he could just hold Robbie’s hand and deflect some of this unwanted attention, but he holds back, for the sake of his career and his public image.

His food doesn’t taste as good after he makes that decision.

It’s apparently not just his general attractiveness that is causing a stir; eventually, a young woman approaches him to ask if he’s in “that new show, what’s it called...*Kitchen Nightmares?*”

“*Kitchen Monsters*,” he corrects. It’s not the first time someone has made this mistake; he wonders if it will ever happen the other way and a celebrity chef will have to make sure everyone knows he has nothing to do with a dark but campy teen show about freakish restaurant workers described as *The Office* meets *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.

Her eyes widen. “It *is* you! Oh my god. I’m such a fan. My best friend is going to be *so* jealous!”



“Thank you,” he replies amiably. He’s just trying to be polite. He wonders how frequent this is about to become for him. He hasn’t been out and about that much in LA since the show started airing because he’s been busy.

“Oh my god I can’t believe I don’t have anything for you to sign,” the girl rambles.

“If you don’t mind,” Robbie cuts in, tone firm but not unkind, “He’s trying to eat his dinner.”

“Oh. Right. Sorry,” the young woman mutters, somewhat sarcastic. She mumbles something as she walks away that Beck can tell is mean, and from Robbie’s face, he knows Robbie heard it and was the target of the remark.

Beck frowns. “Want me to say something?”

“No, no,” Robbie assures him, forcing a smile. “I just want to enjoy being with you.”

It’s good that they make an effort to enjoy their dinner together, because Robbie ends up having some homework to do when they get back to his dorm (“So I can spend tomorrow with you!” is his reasoning, and it’s hard to argue with that). Beck plays around on his phone and watches shows on Robbie’s TV with the sound off, so as not to distract him too much, until he falls asleep on Robbie’s bed, tired from his long week and his day of travel and, frankly, his *life* right now.

Saturday, at least, goes much better; there’s time to devote to each other. Robbie doesn’t have any homework to distract him, no meetings with classmates, and they order pizza and burgers that they can take back to the dorm room to maximize their time together. The most Beck ever sees of someone else is when Robbie’s roommate has to come back to the dorm to pick up a present for his girlfriend, which he gives ample notice for, so Beck and Robbie are dressed and don’t look as though they’ve been all over each other for the past couple of hours.

Robbie’s roommate looks like an athlete, but one of the preppy kinds, like tennis or golf rather than something like baseball or football. He’s lean but in good shape, a bit on the short side, and generically handsome in a straight guy sort of way. Beck understands pretty quickly why the reality of said roommate is less intimidating to Robbie than the abstract idea of him.

The roommate appears surprised when he sees Beck, and studies him, briefly, then states. “So. You must be the boyfriend.”

“Yep,” Beck replies. “I am the boyfriend.”

The roommate nods, merely says, “Cool,” and leaves with his present.

Other than that, he and Robbie spend the rest of Saturday completely devoted to each other. Robbie makes him laugh, he makes him come, and he makes him feel like more than just the pretty face everyone else seems to see. Beck always feels like Robbie sees *into* him. Like Robbie sees Beck as someone who is actually full of emotion, even if he doesn’t always express it. Like Robbie can see Beck as someone with insecurities, despite the fact that everyone seems to think that Beck has it all. That Robbie sometimes sees more in Beck than

Beck even sees in himself, because sometimes, for Beck, inhabiting other people is the only way he knows how to gain insight into his own experience.

On Sunday morning, they have a little bit of time before Beck needs to start driving home so he can get some sleep. Robbie seems keen to stay in the dorm room, but Beck asks, “Don’t you want me to meet some of your friends?” The meeting with Robbie’s roommate has made him wonder how much Robbie’s friends even know about him.

Robbie shakes his head. “I just want more time with you.”

“Yeah, but,” Beck frowns. “I kind of want to meet some of the people who are important to you.”

“No one’s as important to me as you,” Robbie tells him.

Beck doesn’t like this. “Rob,” he starts.

“What?”

“Why do I feel like...you don’t *want* me to meet your friends?”

It hadn’t even been on Beck’s radar, but Robbie immediately blurts out, “I’m not cheating on you.”

“I didn’t say you *were*,” Beck replies evenly. “It’s just feeling like you want to hide me.” He knows this feeling. Jade would sometimes react like this, as if concerned that Beck even *seeing* that other women existed would lead him to cheat on her. Jade’s reaction was often to keep Beck in her sight at all times. This is like that...but kind of the opposite.

“I’m just trying to give us all the time together we can get,” Robbie reiterates.

Something about all of this makes Beck deeply uneasy. It feels like Robbie is hiding something from him, but Beck doesn’t know what. “Are we okay?” he asks Robbie directly.

“Of course!” Robbie replies.

Beck could leave it at that. Robbie sounds earnest, reassuring, and Beck usually doesn’t like to push for hard conversations. But sometimes, things are too important to pretend everything is okay. “Look, I know things have been rough since you left for school.”

Robbie looks away. Neither of them can deny this reality. Part of why this weekend is so important to both of them is because it’s the first time Beck has been able to visit Robbie at school. All last semester, they were apart. And Beck didn’t even get to see Robbie as much as he’d wanted to over winter break because of having to do press. And this semester, so far, has been busy for them both as well, with the difference being that even staying in touch is harder. Beck ends up falling asleep so early, Robbie is often busy with homework by the time he falls asleep. Their ritual of ending the night on the phone whenever possible (except for the rare instances when Robbie’s roommate actually sleeps in his own bed) has mostly stopped. They text as much as they can, though it’s hard to maintain a full conversation when they’re both constantly distracted with other things.

In short, in the back of his mind, Beck has been a little worried that their connection is being lost. It just hadn't fully occurred to him *how* true this might be until he began to feel like Robbie is hiding him.

"It's been hard," Robbie acknowledges, "But the way I feel about you hasn't changed."

"Me, neither," Beck assures him.

Robbie smiles. It looks forced. "Then there's nothing to worry about!" he claims brightly.

"Are you sure?" Beck asks.

"What would there even be?"

"It just feels like...I don't know. We're at risk of...losing touch with each other."

"We're doing okay. We're doing our best," Robbie reassures him. "I'm still here. You're still with me. And I'm so glad you made this trip up to see me."

They grab lunch, and Beck wonders if they might go for a walk together, or maybe watch a movie in Robbie's room. He can probably leave in the mid to late afternoon and still get home in time to get a good six hours of sleep.

But after lunch, Robbie says, "Don't you have to leave soon?"

"Not...necessarily," Beck replies.

Robbie nods uncertainly. "It's just that...I have a big project this week, and I still have a lot of work to do, so..."

Beck gets the picture. It feels like a punch to the gut, but he nods anyway. "Okay. You're right, I should probably head home."

"Besides," Robbie adds, "I want you to be safe and drive while it's still light out."

As Beck goes back to the visitor's parking lot and climbs back into his uncle's truck, he remembers what Jade said to him once, about how he was so afraid to ask out Robbie because he was afraid of rejection, because he'd never been rejected before.

It's hard to tell whether the pain he feels about being asked to leave by Robbie is because he isn't used to the feeling that people don't want him around, or whether it's actually something to worry about.

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It's not that Robbie *wants* Beck to leave. It's not like he doesn't want to squeeze in every possible moment he possibly can with this beautiful, sexy man he is so lucky to be dating. He tries not to cry as Beck drives away. It *hurts*.

But maybe it's better for things to hurt now. Maybe they'll hurt less later.

The writing is on the wall. Robbie sees it every day on Spectrogram, where Beck posts pictures with the hot actors he works with, on Splashface, where the love from all genders pours in and he receives multiple marriage proposals a day. And Robbie is up at his nerdy college, studying computers, while Beck is hanging out with a completely different crowd, where each grueling week on set is like a trauma bond for the young actors, where he spends his days becoming more vulnerable to people who aren't Robbie, because that's what acting *is*, especially to someone like Beck.

Valentine's Day was pretty much perfect, though. And Robbie is at least happy that he'll always have that experience, the memory of their last Valentine's Day together. Because he doesn't think he's ever going to do better than this.

Robbie is no stranger to rejection; Cat, who once had a crush on him, thoroughly rejected him after a single kiss. Freddie has rejected him in every way but by stating it outright, which is fair, because Robbie has never actually *asked*, but...Robbie would. By now he's been able to accept the fact that he would absolutely date Freddie if the situation were to present itself. He'd thought he'd gotten over the crush he had when they first met, but it seems to be back. Maybe it's because they've actually spent a little more time together this semester. Robbie is starting to get to know some of the same people in the computer science program, and he eats a lot of meals with Freddie now. Freddie has even come to his defense a few times when Robbie has said something awkward, or weird (which happens a lot), which Robbie is grateful for. It's hard not to crush on a guy like that.

But being used to rejection doesn't make it any easier to embrace. And he knows the final rejection from Beck is coming.

He just hopes they'll be able to just drift apart, rather than blow up.

That's why he won't talk to Beck about this. That's why he doesn't want to introduce Beck to all his friends. It's going to be bad enough when he loses Beck, and on top of that, he doesn't want to deal with the pity of all of his friends, knowing that they know as well as he does that Robbie is never going to date someone this hot and this kind ever again.

Maybe it's pessimistic. Robbie isn't usually this negative. But he's also a pragmatist. And his most generous and optimistic view of the situation can't come up with any possible way that this works. Like the computers he studies, the program itself is flawed, and starting over from scratch is the only solution.

Valentine's Day is bittersweet. But at least they have it.

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Freddie goes into the week of Valentine's Day simply not even thinking about the upcoming holiday. Why should he? It's not like it's ever really mattered in his life. He's not bitter or angry about a holiday that really has nothing to do with him. It's like Rosh Hashanah. Great for those who celebrate it, and he's happy for them, but irrelevant for him.

That all changes when he happens to meet Melanie for lunch in the middle of the week. They've seen each other here and there since they encountered each other by chance last

semester. It hasn't been a regular thing, just every once in a while, one of them might ask if the other wants to get lunch, or a coffee (though Melanie prefers tea), or a smoothie. They'll chat for a bit, it's often kind of awkward, but they both seem to keep wanting to meet. Freddie can't really figure out why Melanie seems to like meeting up with him, but he definitely enjoys the time he spends with her. And not even for the uncanny valley reasons of literally watching someone who looks exactly like Sam act *nothing* like her. That actually gets old pretty quickly as Freddie begins to see Melanie as her own person, and she begins to look less and less like her twin.

"What are you doing for Valentine's Day?" Melanie asks him out of nowhere. Her tone is casual, but the phrasing of the question throws Freddie off the most, the expectation that he would even *have* plans.

"Uh. No plans," he finally replies. "It's not really my thing."

"Oh. I see," she responds. It takes Freddie a moment to process that she sounds a little disappointed. This confuses him, but then he remembers when they first ran into each other after years, how she seemed like she might be flirting with him. How even when they met as kids, she'd wanted to go on a date with him. He thinks back to what he'd said. The only thing it makes sense for her to be disappointed by is the idea that he might not have any desire to celebrate Valentine's Day at all.

Freddie screws his courage to the stereotypical place and decides to ask Melanie out. "Did you maybe...want to do something on Valentine's Day?"

Melanie seems to stifle a small laugh and tilts her head to the side. "What are you suggesting, Freddie Benson?"

It's weird—*cute* when she uses his full name like that. But hoo boy. He thought the difficult and brave part was over when he asked the question. Why can't Melanie be like the other girls he's dated and pursue *him*? Oh, right. Because she and Sam apparently don't do *anything* the same. "Like do you want to maybe go out on a date or something?" he manages to ask with his last scrap of bravery.

She grins. "I would *love* to. If you're okay with Valentine's Day being your *thing* this year," she teases.

Freddie nods. "Oh, I'm okay," he assures her.

He's so excited he can hardly finish his lunch.

They part ways not long after that, and as they say goodbye, Freddie has a sudden realization like a cold splash of water. "Wait," he asks her. "What do you want to *do* for Valentine's Day?"

She just smiles. "Whatever you want will be fine with me," she simply replies.

Freddie stares after her in an absolute panic.

Between homework and everything else, Freddie struggles to figure out what to do with Melanie for the holiday. He doesn't tell his friends, in part because he doesn't want the added pressure of all their opinions, and also because if Robbie finds out, then there's more of a chance that Sam might find out, and he *especially* doesn't want that when this is still just a date, and might not even go anywhere.

Saturday afternoon, he goes to pick Melanie up from her dorm. It's a warm, beautiful day outside, and Melanie comes out in a sleeveless blouse and a short skirt. She laughs at Freddie's look, but clearly misinterprets it a bit, because she states, "I'm still not used to how *beautiful* the winter weather is here. I'm used to snow and freezing temperatures."

"Yeah, it's pretty nice," Freddie agrees. "Seattle was usually pretty dreary."

"Oh, yeah, I remember," she tells him.

They fall into step together. Freddie doesn't know what to do with his hands, so he just sticks them in his pockets.

"So, where are we headed?" she asks him.

"I thought I'd take you somewhere on campus first," he tells her.

She smiles at this, and he doesn't elaborate, and instead lets it be a surprise when he leads her to the cactus garden on campus. It's beautiful, and it's supposed to be romantic. Freddie hasn't been, and he assumes Melanie hasn't, either.

He smiles at her as they approach. "Did you even know we have a cactus garden here?" he asks, proud of his choice.

She smiles and seems reluctant to nod. "I did, actually. I went to see it pretty soon after transferring here. Cacti and succulents are so *fascinating* and I hadn't ever seen very many up close like this."

Well. That figures. At least it seems to be a theme she's interested in. "Well, then, maybe you can show me around," Freddie suggests. "I've never been here."

They walk around the garden together. There are other couples wandering the grounds together, just enough of them for it to feel a bit awkward as a date location, like privacy isn't quite a possibility. Especially since they don't always see other people because of the dense succulent plant life until they turn a corner and suddenly they aren't alone.

Melanie seems to enjoy the contemplative stroll, but Freddie wonders if it even registers on the romantic scale. As far as he's concerned, they might as well be on a friendly walk.

He really hopes he isn't blowing this.

Especially since they finish their walk in the garden several hours before the only dinner reservation he was able to get, the latest possible time slot at a local restaurant.

"That was fun," Melanie says cheerfully as they exit the garden. "What now?"

Freddie thinks on his feet. “I thought we might catch a movie. We should have time for one before our dinner reservation.”

Melanie looks at her watch and her eyebrows climb, probably at the realization of when dinner is supposed to be, but she doesn’t comment, and they head to the movie theater.

It turns out that when Freddie asks which movie will get them out in time for their dinner reservation, there’s only really one possibility, so he takes it. He doesn’t even really register the title of the movie. They buy a small popcorn to share, as Melanie claims she’ll only want to eat “a little” and Freddie’s stomach is too nervous to eat much, either. He’d kind of thought this date might go differently. Like he and Melanie would find something so profound and interesting to talk about while they walked hand in hand through the cactus garden that the hours would fly by and they’d have to rush to make their dinner reservation, laughing at how they couldn’t believe it was already time to eat.

Instead, they end up watching *The Babadook*...yeah, not the best choice for a first date. Especially not when *Freddie* is the one who nearly jumps out of his skin during one of the few jumpscare in the film.

Melanie pats his shoulder, laughing softly in the aftermath of being frightened. It’s not a comfort.

Freddie doesn’t know *what* to say after they get out of the movie. He should apologize, probably. But he’s saved from having to say anything by the fact that they have to rush to make their dinner reservation, and there isn’t much time for small talk.

Freddie pulls into the restaurant, explaining, “I’ve actually never been here, but they have great reviews.”

Melanie looks at the sign for *Lady Bird Texas BBQ* warily. “I guess we’ll see,” she replies, sounding nervous, probably waiting for the rest of this date to turn into a disaster. She rubs her arms. The evening has cooled down considerably, and it was chilly in the movie theater, and Freddie didn’t even have anything to offer to put on her arms, and he’d been too shy (and too freaked out) to put his arm around her. He was afraid he’d accidentally punch her in the head if there was another jumpscare.

At least the restaurant isn’t so chilly. Maybe because it’s so crowded. But once they’re seated and looking over the menu, Freddie finds out why, exactly, Melanie had seemed so hesitant when they were outside.

“Freddie,” she says quietly, eyes running over the pages of the menu rapidly. “I’m a vegetarian.”

“You’re—*what*? Oh, my god.” He swears his life is flashing by before his eyes.

“I thought you knew.” She’s chewing her lip anxiously.

“I guess I just thought you liked to eat healthy.” He *had* noticed she eats a lot of salads. He’d never noticed they didn’t have chicken or bacon bits in them. And he’d never scrutinized the

contents of her sandwiches (which, apparently, just have cheese and vegetables in them). He can't believe he messed this up *again*.

"I think it's okay," she says, trying to be optimistic. "I can order some sides. I'll just have to check and make sure the baked beans are vegetarian and the mac and cheese doesn't have bacon or something in it."

"God, I'm *so* sorry," Freddie blurts out. "I just...*man*. I'm so sorry I took you to see an *awful* movie and then somewhere where you can't even order an entree."

Melanie blinks in surprise. "It certainly wasn't my favorite movie, but I didn't think it was awful," she replies.

"You didn't?"

She shakes her head. "I thought it told a compelling story about grief."

Freddie hadn't considered that. He'd been too busy stressing about how this must be the worst date Melanie had ever been on. "I didn't think of that," he admits. "You might be right."

"Maybe," she says. "It's just what it made me think of."

He wonders how to even touch the topic of grief with a girl who has barely been in contact with her family since elementary school. He's saved from saying something stupid by the arrival of the waiter.

The waiter is clearly harried and exhausted, but he puts on a brave face as he greets the table, setting down waters and asking about drink orders. Freddie follows Melanie's lead and sticks with water, and they tell him they're ready to order food. Freddie picks the first thing his eyes land on—a pulled pork sandwich—and Melanie begins to ask him some questions about the sides to determine what's vegetarian.

The waiter gives Freddie a bit of a side eye as he realizes Freddie brought a vegetarian to a BBQ restaurant, but then he interrupts to suggest Melanie order their veggie burger. "It's new, so it's not on our menu quite yet, and we took down the little table cards advertising them to put out these special Valentine's Day dessert ones instead. But we definitely have them and we'd be happy to make one for you."

Melanie seems *thrilled*. Freddie wonders if this date might turn around, after all.

Once they've ordered, and they talk a little bit more about the movie, it's like the tension between them has been broken, and suddenly, they're more comfortable with each other. And they talk. Like about actual things more than just college. Melanie tells Freddie more about her boarding school in Vermont, Freddie relays what it was like to attend public school in Seattle as one of her twin's friends. Melanie talks about how much she loves lacrosse and horseback riding and skiing, and Freddie tells her he's actually pretty good at fencing (though he doesn't mention he really hasn't done it in years, and he *certainly* doesn't mention that his mom is even better at it). Melanie reveals that she's seen every broadcast of *iCarly*, though



she never wants Sam to find out, and asks what it was like to work on, wonders if they're planning to continue it, maybe over summer break? Freddie enjoys talking to someone who seems genuinely curious about his work on the show, and isn't just trying to get a taste of whatever minimal fame Freddie actually has.

After dinner, he takes Melanie back to her dorm. "Thank you for a really great night," Melanie tells him.

He nods, slowly. "You know, I was worried it wouldn't be, but I think it turned out okay," he says brightly.

"It was great," she smiles.

Freddie wonders what's next. They're just standing there, looking at each other. Does she want to kiss him? How can he tell?

But as the silence stretches, she takes a step back. "Well, goodnight, Freddie. I'll see you around."

"Goodnight," he answers, but then immediately adds, "We could—did you maybe want to—you know, kiss?"

She turns back to him and smiles fully. "Of *course*," she murmurs, then leans forward and presses the most gentle, chaste kiss against his mouth.

He could swear that he hears angels sing.

And then, she pulls away. "I'll talk to you later," she says softly, and disappears into her dorm.

Freddie wanders back to his dorm room. It's not his first kiss with Melanie, but it's the first time he's kissed Melanie *knowing* that it's Melanie, and it *feels* more powerful and special than any kiss he ever shared with Sam. Not that he needs to compare them. But it feels... *right*. In a way that few other kisses in his life ever have.

All in all, he thinks this Valentine's Day went pretty damn well.

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Melanie had *wanted* to invite Freddie up into her room. Not for, you know, *sex* or anything like that, at least not *this* early into any kind of dating situation. But that's just it, she doesn't even know what this dating situation even *is*, and the last thing she wants to do is to mislead a perfectly nice boy who she has always thought is *really* cute.

This has been one of the best dates she's ever been on. Not that she's been on a *ton*; all-girls boarding school had limited her dating options for a while, and she dated a little bit at Yale, but there was never anything serious. Not that *this* is serious. Which is kind of the point, and also kind of the dilemma.

She *likes* Freddie. She just hopes he's able to be on board for what she needs right now.

He texts her the next day, telling her how much he enjoyed their date and that he wonders if she has some free time today. She's pretty busy, but it's also important to her that they meet. She hadn't wanted to say anything yesterday, because she had wanted the date to just be... *enough*. And also because, until he asked to kiss her, she wasn't even really sure if Freddie was actually into her.

So they meet for tea (or, in Freddie's case, coffee) in the afternoon. Melanie suggests they go for a walk with their drinks, and Freddie readily agrees.

"I can't stop thinking about our date," Freddie gushes.

"Me, neither," Melanie agrees. "I had a really great time with you."

"Me, too," Freddie answers excitedly. "Would you...ever want to do it again sometime?" he suggests.

"Go out for Valentine's Day?" she teases.

"I mean. Date. Again. Like, maybe a little more regularly than once a year."

Melanie takes in a breath. It's *exactly* what she wants. She just needs to set her expectations.

She needs to take things *slow*. Not just because it's what she prefers in terms of building intimacy, but because there are...*things* about her. Secrets. That she needs to keep very close to the chest, that keep people from really knowing her. In part, she's never dated seriously because she hasn't ever encountered someone she thought could really *handle* her.

But despite all of this, she tells Freddie genuinely, "I would really like that."

"Me, too," he answers.

"I really like you, Freddie."

He looks mildly shocked. Which is funny, because Melanie certainly wasn't expecting this to be *news*. "I like you, too," he replies in a quiet voice.

"I would like to keep seeing you," Melanie says, "But I just, I have to warn you about how *busy* I am."

"What do you mean?" he asks, frowning a little.

"I just mean, between my classes and my work-study at the library, I don't know how often I'm going to have time to...date." Aand, this is another genuine snag. Even if she were ready to date Freddie seriously right now, time would still be an issue.

Melanie has worked hard to put as much distance between herself and her mother and her family's lifestyle. It's something she and Sam have in common, though they go about it in completely opposite ways. For Melanie, it's been about academics, and opportunity, and scholarships, and advancement and career and success. She's not about to let a resource as infinitely renewable as romance stop her from achieving the life she wants.

It's also kind of a convenient excuse to keep her distance as she gets to know someone. But that doesn't mean it's dishonest.

But Freddie seems unfazed as he raises his eyebrows. "I get it. Believe me, I'm busy, too."

"I just don't want you to think I'm blowing you off if I tell you I'm too busy some of the time," she says. "Because I *do* really like you."

"I won't take it personally."

They keep walking together. She has let Freddie take the lead on a lot of this, but even she realizes that she's been the one... *guiding* him to take the lead. She's the one who flirted with him, she's the one who brought up the idea of Valentine's Day. She's the one who waited so long for him to kiss her that he finally realized that was the right move at the end of a successful date.

But now, she finally makes a move of her own, and reaches out to take his hand in hers as they walk. His hand is soft, but once he reacts and moves to grasp her hand in return, there's a certain reassuring strength in his grip.

He's quiet for a long time as they just walk, holding hands, sipping their drinks.

When he stops walking and turns to face her, Melanie assumes they're probably about to kiss again. But instead, Freddie looks at her, like a deer in headlights, and blurts out, "I'm bisexual."

Melanie blinks in utter surprise. "Oh?" she replies, because she's not sure what else to say. It's a reveal, but it's the timing more than the content that shocks her.

"I just thought you should know," he says, sounding miserable. "I mean, I know we're not serious but I figured you'd want to know if we ever *got* serious and I figured I should just tell you now so you would...know."

"Okay," she replies. It strikes her how *very* different their two approaches to big secrets that might impact future compatibility are. But then, though Freddie clearly seems a little ashamed of his secret, Melanie knows that his sexuality isn't even remotely the same magnitude of private as...what she *is*. Still, it seems like there should be more to say about his revelation, so she adds, "Thank you for telling me."

It's his turn to look surprised. "That's it?"

"What else should I say?"

"I—I thought maybe you...wouldn't want to date me anymore."

"You thought I wouldn't want to date you because you're bisexual? When my sister is a lesbian?" She's a little incredulous now. Why would he think she'd be homophobic? Not that Sam ever officially *came out* to her, but...come on, it's obvious.

“No! I mean, yes, she is, but...I thought that maybe it would be a *turn off* or something, I don’t know.” Freddie seems bemused.

“I guess it doesn’t matter to me who else you might be attracted to as long as you like me.”

“Oh,” Freddie answers. He reaches to take her hand and they start walking again.

Melanie starts thinking aloud, “Though, I do understand it might have implications for our possible future...sex life,” Aaand, her face is hot.

“Don’t worry,” Freddie says quickly, “I haven’t even done anything with a guy yet.” A glance shows he seems about as mortified as she feels.

*Me neither*, Melanie thinks. And then she wonders how far Freddie has gotten with a girl. They’re kind of on the topic. She could ask.

But maybe it’s better to leave some mystery between them. So that one day, *if* they get to the point where they want to explore sex together, there’s still plenty to talk about.

Instead, she just enjoys the feeling of walking under the warm winter sun, hand in hand with a cute boy she crushed on *years* ago, who grew up to be even more handsome than she could have guessed.

# Seething

**March 2015**

Jade's Spring Break falls at the end of March, and of course, it doesn't match up with Tori's this year. Go figure. Another month of barely seeing each other and now Jade feels like she doesn't even have anything to look forward to when it comes to Spring Break. Sam and Cat's spring break is similarly out of sync with hers, Andre and Carly obviously have the same spring break as Tori, and Beck has been completely out of touch since he started filming his show again. Not that Jade can really blame him. She's seen some of the buzz, and she's happy for him, even if she rolls her eyes every time she sees his name on Splashface.

But she realizes, when Robbie texts the group chat, that Stanford's spring break lines up with hers, and it occurs to her that this could be the perfect opportunity to work with Freddie on a short film. It's not for any particular assignment, but Jade has been itching to put some of her skills to use outside of a classroom setting, and she already knows that Freddie is someone she can work with and be satisfied with the outcome.

She texts him to ask if he's coming to Los Angeles for spring break. He seems surprised by the suggestion, probably because it isn't as though it's going to be like last year, when most people had the same time period off. He tells her that he hadn't planned on it, but Jade manages to convince him to come down for a few days to work on her short film. Mostly by refusing to take no for an answer. As extra incentive, she also texts with Beck for the first time in a while and gets him to agree to host a party on Friday night of spring break, just as her break is starting to wrap up and everyone else's is beginning.

Jade spends the free time she has at the beginning of the break figuring out what, exactly, she wants to film. Freddie is coming down on Tuesday and leaving on Saturday, so she only has a few days to work with him. It's a bit of a challenge, finding which of her projects she can shape into something simple and easy; she won't have her typical talent pool in the form of her other friends, who will be in school. She *will* have Robbie. Apparently, in an effort to reduce the cost of travel, he's traveling with Freddie for spring break. Jade thinks it's a little odd that he's not staying longer, to spend time with Beck, but Robbie has always been weird about money. Probably because he usually doesn't have a lot of it.

She decides to shape a simple sleep paralysis story into something that can be done with just Robbie (and maybe Beck in a weird costume, if she can get him after his shoots wrap), and something that she can see Freddie's camera work being great at evoking. Freddie is one of the few people her age she's met who possibly has more experience behind a camera than she does. While most of his skills were honed in an improvisational, almost documentary style while working on *iCarly*, Jade thinks this makes him great at thinking on his feet, and she knows he's not afraid to get close to a subject or lean into absurdity. She trusts him to handle the cinematography.

Other than the film they worked on over the summer, Jade has always filmed all her projects herself (and often cast, dressed, set, directed, edited, scored, and even acted in them, too), but

something she's learning how to do is delegate and collaborate. With this particular project, she wants to focus on directing her actors. The subject matter will give her and Robbie a lot of room to experiment to try to get what she wants out of this short film. Robbie is a capable performer, though he tends to ask a lot of annoying questions, so the less Jade has to focus on when actually filming, the better.

She gets excited enough about this project that even when Tori has some free time on Sunday, Jade declines to spend time with her, because she's busy turning her little brother's bedroom into a film set (he's at their dad's for a week, so it's not like he needs to use it) and trying to find the most disturbing costume for her sleep paralysis incubus to wear.

She tries to wheedle Beck into participating in her film, and although he's clearly tempted, especially by the idea of working with Robbie, he laments that he just won't have time. Jade calls him a sellout and ends the conversation, but she understands. Trying to work around his schedule would have been difficult anyway.

Good thing she doesn't have an extremely specific vision for the role she wanted Beck to play. She tries to figure out who else might be available to be in her film. She really doesn't want to use someone in her program if she can avoid it. That would mean letting them know where she lives. And then, the idea comes to her.

Her pitch to Sam starts out with a simple text:

**So, you don't really care about school, right?**

The reply gives her plenty to work with.

**I mean it gives me something to do but**

**Pretty much yeah**

So Jade offers her something else to do that will likely be a lot more interesting. Sam readily accepts. She gets out of school a lot earlier than Beck finishes on set, and has always described her approach to homework as "flexible," so she's much easier to work with.

Now that she has cast Sam, her sleep paralysis incubus costume comes together easily: Sam is short, so her brother's old Power Rangers costume should fit her. Jade modifies it to look less like what it is. Topped with a generic old man mask (that Jade also adds some creative additions to) it should work.

Freddie is staying with her while he's in town. Jade doesn't really like having houseguests—unless it's Tori, of course—but it at least makes logical sense. When Freddie arrives on

Tuesday, he, Robbie and Jade go over what they'll be shooting on Wednesday until an exhausted-looking Beck comes to pick up Robbie. Jade sets up Freddie on the couch, since he can't stay in her brother's room because it's set for the film.

And the next day, they start filming.

Robbie is about as easy to work with as he normally is, but Jade appreciates being able to work closely with him, to help him find the beats of this admittedly simple character who is basically just a guy having a nightmare. But there's a vaguely erotic component to the sleep paralysis creature, which was part of why she'd wanted Beck to portray him. Beck has been leaning into the sexy lately in his work, it wouldn't be a stretch for him.

She trusts Sam to handle this, too, though, because Sam isn't afraid of anything and she's seen the way she will literally tackle anything on *iCarly*. But to her surprise, when Sam arrives to start working on the film, she balks at what she's asked to do.

"Wait, so I'm like a *sexy* incubus?"

"What do you think an incubus even *is*?" Jade asks.

"I dunno, I don't normally have wet dreams about demons. Especially not ones with old man faces."

"Too bad for you," Jade replies. She scrutinizes Sam in her tight modified Power Rangers getup, the old man mask dangling from her hand. "Maybe I should add a strap-on to your costume."

"Oh, yeah, like that'll help me feel sexier." Sam rolls her eyes. "Also, I'm not wearing *yours*."

Jade isn't about to admit that she doesn't have one. She and Tori just have never really felt the need to branch out into toys like that quite yet. Though, now that she thinks about it, maybe it would be something fun to try...

She pushes the thought out of her head. Robbie pipes up, "We could add a bulge instead of a boner."

"That's not a bad idea," Jade admits. The tight costume emphasizes Sam's curves, maybe another suggestive shape in the fabric is better than a prominent phallus that would draw all the attention in the shot.

She and Sam work on adding a distinctive bulge shape to her costume while Freddie stands back and mutters, "Okay, this is *really* weird."

"Don't be jealous because I look so good," Sam teases once her costume is back on. She pulls on her old man mask and gyrates her hips toward Freddie, who looks horrified and backs away a few more steps. "Hey, this is kinda fun." She starts dancing, swiveling her hips.

"There. That's a lot more like what I want," Jade tells her. "Just slower. But we're already set up to shoot the bed, so first we're doing the part where you pounce on Robbie."

This scene involves her jumping on him, then simply lying motionless on top of him, making guttural slurping sounds and laughing. Robbie already seems incredibly apprehensive even before they start filming. Good. Maybe his natural fear of Sam can be used to their advantage. Getting Sam comfortable with the physicality of her character first is good, too, even if they're not filming her dreamlike, gyrating, thrusting dance quite yet.

She works with her actors to figure out how they'll be situated on the bed, and Freddie advises her how they can safely shoot something that *looks* like Sam pouncing on Robbie without asking them to *actually* bash their bodies together and risk injury. Sam seems willing to just go for it, which isn't surprising. The full moon is a little more than a week away, which means she wouldn't have to worry much. But much as the idea of hurting Robbie is kinda fun, Jade elects to be responsible, and keep her actors from injury.

They shoot the scene of them on the bed. It's incredibly awkward, which probably only adds to the creepiness of the scene. Freddie gets a *great* overhead shot of Robbie staring right into the camera in desperate horror.

Afterwards, she and Freddie reset the lighting to shoot Sam dancing across the room. Lighting is also something Freddie has an eye for, which is extremely helpful.

"Let's start with a POV full shot, then we can move into closeups," Freddie suggests, after Jade gets Sam placed across the room and advises her on how to dance.

"Exactly," Jade agrees. Already, she and Freddie have been extremely in sync during this shoot. Granted, they went over a lot of what she wants the night before, but even when Freddie suggests something new, it's often what Jade has been thinking. Like the closeups he's suggesting. They are unspecific, but when they shift into filming them, Jade barely even has to indicate what she wants, he focuses on exactly all the right areas of Sam, from the obvious chest and hips and head, but also to her weirdly claw-like hands that sway with her movements.

Yeah, she really likes working with Freddie.

"You've come a long way from random dancing," Freddie teases Sam as they work.

"I just think of it like dancing as an *attack*. Against you," she informs him. That makes him shut his mouth for the rest of the time they film her dance. Jade doesn't like that. She wants to hear his opinions as they work.

Once Sam's dance is filmed, they're wrapped for the day. They just have a few scenes to shoot tomorrow in the kitchen, of Robbie going to bed the night before, and then the next morning discovering Sam is crouched beneath the table waiting for him, and realizing his nightmare isn't over.

She and Freddie go over the footage he shot that night, to make sure there isn't anything else they want to film in the bedroom the next day. Jade is quite satisfied with everything he's shot so far. He blushes when she praises the closeups of Sam's body, and the eerie, uncomfortable sensuality it evokes.



“Well, the tone you set really does a lot of the work,” he tells her. “And Sam is pretty good at being frightening no matter what the context.”

“Yeah, actually, I’m glad we have her over Beck,” Jade decides. “I think Beck would somehow manage to make it *actually* sexy.”

“I could see that,” Freddie agrees.

The shoot the next day is a little shorter and easier. Though Robbie is the one who points out something interesting as they work.

“Why *is* the incubus hiding under the table? Is its goal to scare me, or seduce me?”

It’s a good point. “Both?” Jade suggests.

“Uh, I’m not miming blowing him,” Sam pipes up.

“You don’t have to,” Jade decides. “Maybe just touch your old man lips sexily or something when we do this POV shot.”

“Sick,” Sam replies, sounding delighted.

“I’m actually starting to understand the sex appeal of this sleep paralysis demon,” Robbie observes in fascination, staring at Sam. “It has a kind of...sexy androgyny.”

“You’re probably suffering from some kind of erotic Stockholm syndrome,” Freddie informs him absently as he sets up the camera. “There’s no other rational explanation.”

“Ignore Freddie,” Sam purrs at Robbie in a creepily suggestive tone, “He’s just jealous because he’s never been called sexy a day in his life.”

Freddie rolls his eyes, but purses his lips together in a way that suggests Sam’s jab might have landed.

“Sexy doesn’t come naturally to all of us,” Robbie commiserates with him.

“All right, stay focused,” Jade says irritably. “We only have a couple of shots left.” She’s surprised to realize that she’s most annoyed at Sam for insulting Freddie and not Robbie for all his inane chatter. Even though insults are practically the entire basis for Sam and Freddie’s friendship. It’s certainly never bothered her before.

It isn’t until they’re wrapping up the shoot that she realizes why.

“Thanks for inviting me to do this,” Freddie tells her genuinely as they tear down and pack up film equipment. “This was actually really fun.”

“I’m glad you were here,” she tells him. “You’ve really got an eye for this stuff and it was cool to be able to focus on directing.”

“Granted, I haven’t seen a lot of directors at work,” Freddie prefaces, “But you’re *really* good. The way you worked with Robbie to evoke all those emotions. And Sam...she seemed hopeless at first, but you really shaped her into something *fucked up*.”

“Even at my worst, I’m never as hopeless as you, Benson,” Sam tosses at him.

Jade bites back her urge to tell Sam to shut up, but she does shoot her a scowl. Freddie smiles at Jade when he notices, and gives her a respectful nod.

And that’s when it hits Jade.

*No. Oh, no.*

The little flutter of butterflies in her stomach. The way her skin feels warm just from the way he looks at her. How she’s *actually* enjoyed his company in a way she really hasn’t enjoyed being around anyone in her program. Or, really, how she doesn’t enjoy much of anyone aside from Tori.

Jade has a crush on Freddie.

And she hates it.

Sam and Robbie leave, and Jade disappears to her bedroom with the excuse that she has to get ready for Beck’s party tonight. Her mom comes home and seems pleased to see Freddie, and for once, Jade is happy that she’s around to chat one of her friends’ ears off, so that she can just avoid Freddie for as long as humanly possible.

Rationally, Jade knows this isn’t a big deal. Or it shouldn’t be. Like she told Cat a year or so ago, crushes are supposed to be fun, they aren’t supposed to mean anything about the state of your relationship. The best thing to do would be to safely indulge it and enjoy.

But Jade has never been someone who could do that with a crush. For one thing, she’s *never* liked the way crushes make her feel: silly and soft and fragile. And crushes are actually fairly rare for her, because she simply doesn’t like most people. She crushed on Beck and she crushed on Tori, and her crush on Tori meant she was unhappy with Beck. Oh, and she’d never actually liked Moose; that had merely been a ploy to annoy Beck, and also, honestly, it’s not like Moose was *that* handsome anyway. Tori has since admitted to her that she had been overcompensating a bit because of her burgeoning realization about her queerness, and Cat is possibly the only one of the three of them to actually be interested in the large Canadian boy. Though, knowing Cat, she may have had her own ulterior motives.

But the timing of this crush fills her with dread. She hadn’t known it at the time, but there was something wrong with the very core of her relationship with Beck. Her crush on Tori had been a symptom of that, an alternate fantasy, a possibility representing a relationship with someone who could actually love her. And for her to get a crush on Freddie *now*...when she’s barely had any time to spend with Tori...when she’d *actively* chosen to focus on a project with *him* rather than spend time with *her*...when missing Tori has become so routine that she’s almost *numb* to it most of the time...

How is she supposed to maintain a relationship that numbs her out most of the time?

Is this crush just her heart's desperate way to feel *something*?

Jade doesn't know how to read this crush as anything but an inauspicious portend of the demise of her relationship with Tori.

Jade refuses to let that happen. And she's going to starve her crush out at the very source to achieve it.

They drive to Beck's party together, and Jade plays music just a little too loud to facilitate conversation. After a few "what?"s when he tries to speak and a refusal to turn the music down, Freddie seems to get the picture and is quiet for the rest of the drive.

At the party, she barely leaves Tori's side, and ignores Freddie completely. Friends want to ask about the project, especially as Robbie and Sam gush about it, and Sam performs her creepy-sexy dance for anyone who requests it.

"Eh, Freddie was fine," Jade relays to their curious friends. "It's not that hard to point and shoot a camera, you know."

Tori elbows her, but Jade ignores it.

By the end of the night, Jade knows she has no intention of going back to her house with Freddie, even though she is supposed to be his designated driver. She tells him flatly that he's staying somewhere else, because she's going to Tori's.

"He can't stay here," Beck says, sounding irritated. He's clearly exhausted; he's been trying to coax everyone to leave for almost two hours now, and just as clearly wants to spend some time with Robbie.

"Carly's giving me a ride home," Andre says sympathetically. "You can stay at my place. We can make room in the car, right guys?"

"Oh, this'll be fun," Sam mumbles, "Five people shoved into a VW Bug."

"Too bad we don't have the car with the *roomy* backseat," Cat giggles.

"Don't even *compare* Vin Diesel to that car," Sam says, offended.

Tori is pretty tipsy, so Jade doesn't expect much from their conversation on the way home, but to her surprise, Tori asks, "What happened with you and Freddie?"

"Nothing," Jade answers, a little too quickly.

"I just thought you liked working with him."

Jade sighs. "He did fine. I just got tired of looking at him."

"Ah." Tori seems to accept that explanation.

And as soon as they get back to Tori's house, Jade drags Tori on top of her, with the sole goal of making it clear to Tori how much she's missed her.

Tori *very* enthusiastically reciprocates the sentiment.

## **April 2015**

It's the Friday at the end of his Spring Break, and everyone is busy for some reason; Tori has plans with Jade; Sam, Cat and Carly have plans with each other. Even Beck is hanging out with his castmates. Andre decides it's probably good they all hung out last Friday, at the very beginning of Spring Break, because it looks like this weekend is going to be a bit of a bust

But fine. He can entertain himself. He texts a girl named Dee from his music program to see what she's up to. She's cute, they have a good rapport, and he thinks it's time to shoot his shot with her.

She calls him immediately. Well, that's always a good sign. He does his best to sound as casual and chill as possible as he answers. "Hey, what's up?"

"Andre!" she greets. "Aren't you going to Tanner's party tonight?"

"Tanner..." Andre prompts.

"You know, *Tanner!*"

It doesn't seem like it would be helpful, but actually it is. There's a senior in the music program who seems to know everybody. Andre has a class with him. He's nice enough, but they don't talk that much. "Ohh, *that* Tanner," he answers. "No, I didn't know about it."

"Oh! Well, you should definitely come," Dee informs him.

"Will you be there?"

"Of course!" she laughs.

But still... "Are you sure it's cool? He didn't invite me." Andre doesn't want to be a party crasher. It's not his style.

"Oh, definitely," she assures him. "It's always open house at his parties. Everyone is welcome!"

"Well, then, I'll see you tonight," he promises.

"Can't wait!" she gushes. "I'll text you the address," she adds before they hang up.

Now *this* sounds like a great way to finish out his spring break.

The address Dee sends him is in North Hills, up in the Valley. The proximity to Northridge makes Andre wonder for a second if he's going to run into Rex here, before he remembers how impossible this is; Robbie is back up at Stanford, and Rex can't move around the world independently, despite the fact that Robbie is so talented he often made it feel like Rex *could*. It's certainly a testament to his skill that even now, years after Rex has been a regular fixture in their friend group, Andre forgets a little.

The address turns out to be for a small house. Andre wonders if Tanner still lives at home with his parents.

Quickly, it becomes pretty obvious that this is college housing, though. The furniture is basically all from Wanko's Warehouse and the decor includes things like dart boards and neon signs featuring silhouettes of women. Nothing wrong with that, though.

Dee notices Andre right away. "Andre!" she shouts, "You made it!"

"Sure did," he laughs, suddenly feeling awkward in her presence.

"Come say hi!" She gestures for him to follow her into the kitchen, where Tanner is standing, chatting with some other people as he mixes a drink. "Tanner!" Dee enthusiastically flings herself at him.

He smiles. "Hey, babe," he greets, leaning down to kiss her.

*Oh*. Suddenly, Andre doesn't feel so hot.

"You know Andre, right?" Dee asks.

"Sure." Tanner regards him coolly, looking like he knows full well why Andre showed up to this party. "How's it going?" He gestures around him. "Help yourself."

Andre wasn't planning to drink and right now, he's sorely tempted, but he just pours himself some juice instead.

"Andre is the one I was telling you about," Dee tells Tanner. "With that one song."

Tanner merely nods. But then, it's not like Dee has been very specific. Andre takes a big gulp of his drink to avoid having to speak, but it doesn't work, and after a moment he says. "Nice place. Is it yours?"

"Nah," Tanner says flatly. "We just rent. Me and some buddies, they go to school up here, so." He shrugs.

"Right. Got it."

It quickly gets awkward as Tanner starts groping Dee, who giggles and tries to squirm away. Well, there go Andre's plans for his night. He'd had no idea Dee was dating *anyone*, much less Tanner. He thought she'd been into *him*.

And from the daggers Tanner stares at him, maybe she *is*. But Andre doesn't play that way. Nope. Time to keep his distance.

Back in the living room, he scans the crowd. There are definitely some people from his program, people he has classes with. They're mostly upperclassmen, and no one he knows all *that* well. The person he knows best here is Dee. And that's not a good thing.

Maybe he should just leave.

But as he starts to make his way toward the door, someone calls, "Hey!" Andre turns. There's an excitable-looking guy pointing at him. "I know you!"

"You do?" Andre asks, glancing behind him to make sure he's the one being addressed here.

"Yeah! I saw you play a short set at the Pronghorn downtown!"

"Oh! Yeah, that was me." Andre had played at the bar over winter break. It had felt like a pretty well-received performance.

"You were really good!" the guy gushes.

"Thanks, man." Andre nods modestly. "Are you in the music program, too?" He doesn't recognize the guy.

"Oh, nah, I'm up at Northridge, you must know Tanner. I'm friends with his roommate Cody."

"Gotcha." Northridge College. Well, that doesn't make him think of Rex, that makes him think of—

"Oh. Hello, Andrew."

*Trina.*

Andre whips around, and there she is, wearing a low-cut top, tight jeans, and well-applied makeup.

He's surprised, but he's honestly more annoyed. "Okay, come on, you *know* my name is Andre!" he scowls at her.

"Yeah, yeah." She rolls her eyes.

"Oh, hey, you know him?" the guy asks Trina in a polite tone.

"He's friends with my sister."

"Oh, cool." The guy looks away from Trina. He seems to be scanning the crowd. And in a moment, he's standing up with a grin and going over to talk to a girl who just walked in. A very pretty girl.

And, Andre's not about to stay and talk to Trina. He starts making his way toward the exit.

As he starts down the sidewalk toward where he parked, he hears a feminine voice call after him, "Hey, wait up!"

He turns, half hoping it's going to be Dee, but oh, of course, it's Trina. "Why?" he asks her. "So you can call me by the wrong name again?"

"Whatever, I thought you'd laugh at this point. Obviously I know your name."

"What do you want?" he asks her.

"Are you leaving?"

"What's it look like?"

"Take me with you?"

"What? Why?"

"Because the guy I came with is going to be leaving with someone else."

Andre blinks. "Who? How do you know?"

"That guy you were talking to. You didn't see him go straight for that girl?"

"Sure, but that doesn't mean—"

"That's his ex. Yesterday, they weren't talking. They are *more than* talking now." She shakes her head. "I'm not going to stick around to be mistreated like this."

Ah. Well. Andre can relate to that. "Sure, come on," he sighs as they fall into step together. "If it makes you feel any better, I thought I was coming here to meet a girl, but turns out, she's seeing somebody, too."

"Well, no wonder you're leaving already."

*Exactly.*

They get into Andre's car together. Andre is glad he didn't decide to drink anything. He has no intention of ever giving the cops any reason to pull him over if he can help it, so he doesn't drink unless he has a solid plan for how to get home.

And now, apparently, he's Trina's plan to get home, too.

"I'll give you directions," Trina tells him.

Andre laughs. "Yeah, I know how to get to your house."

"I'm not going to my house."

Andre glances at her. “You’re not going to ask me to drop you off at that *guy’s* house, are you?”

“Oh, god no.”

“Good. I’m not gonna be an accessory to a crime.”

“No, fuck him, I’m not even going to think of him,” Trina says spitefully. “No, you can drop me off at Sinjin’s place.”

“Wh—Wait. Sinjin. *Our* Sinjin?”

“Yeah. I live with him. Take a right at the stop sign.”

“Since *when*? Also, don’t you *hate* Sinjin?”

“Since I realized he lived conveniently close to my school and I got tired of driving all the way to the Hollywood Hills to commute. And he’s not so bad anymore. He and I have an arrangement and you can’t beat free rent.”

*Oh god.* “Do I even want to know?”

Trina rolls her eyes. “Oh, my god, it’s not *that*. It’s simple: he and Burf have this apartment, I stay in the spare room whenever I want, and in exchange, I allow myself to be seen with him every once in a while. Turn left here, straight at the next light.”

Andre...feels bad for Sinjin. He wonders why he ever thought it was a good idea to let Trina into his car. “That’s fucked up,” he tells her. He’s not going to pull any punches. She’s taking advantage of Sinjin, and that poor guy has had it hard enough already.

“You don’t get it,” Trina fumes.

“What’s there to get? You’re taking advantage of—”

“—Turn right—”

“—this guy who probably always had a thing for you, now that I think about it.”

Trina laughs, almost maniacally. “Oh, he is not into me that way.”

Andre doesn’t have a good comeback for that. “*Huh?*”

Trina sighs. “Fine. Not like it’s any of your business, but—oh shit, turn here.”

Andre does, quickly, “For the *love* of—”

“Well *sorry*, it’s hard to concentrate on giving directions when you’re just *insulting* me left and right!”

“Well then explain to me why I *shouldn’t*!”



“Look. Sinjin and Burf are...well, honestly, I don’t really know the specifics of their relationship. But they’re the most important thing in the world to each other, but Sinjin’s father is a real piece of work, so I let Sinjin’s family think I’m his girlfriend to keep him off Sinjin’s back.” After a moment, she says, “Turn left up here and then find a parking spot where you can.”

Andre is still processing what he’s been told, to the point that he almost forgets to turn left as instructed. “Wow,” he finally comments. “I didn’t think you—” Well, what he *wants* to say is that he didn’t think she’d care enough to do something like that for someone, but he quickly catches himself. “—were that close with Sinjin.”

Trina huffs. “Oh, it’s not like we’re best friends or anything. He’s still weird and annoying. But nobody deserves to get disowned or cut off because of something like who they want to spend their life with.”

Again, Andre is surprised she’d...care. He shakes himself off a little bit. This is surreal.

He parks, and Trina looks over at him. “Thanks for the ride.”

“No problem,” Andre replies easily.

But Trina’s not getting out of the car. Finally, she asks, “Want to come in for a bit?”

Well, Andre’s night is a total bust, so... “Yeah. Why not?” He kind of wants to see this setup with Trina, Burf, and Sinjin for himself.

Trina guides him up to the apartment. They take the stairs, and Andre has to force himself not to look at Trina’s ass in her tight jeans as she walks ahead of him. The apartment is close to the stairwell on the second floor. It’s dark when Trina opens the door.

“Aren’t Sinjin and Burf here?” Andre asks.

“Oh, no. They have better things to do on a Friday night than hang out here.”

It feels like a jab, but then Andre sees the amusement in her expression. He grins, too. If it’s a jab, it’s equally as self-deprecating.

“Want a drink?” Trina asks him. “I can do, um, vodka cranberry, rum and Joke-a-Cola...”

“I’m still twenty,” Andre tells her.

“So? I know you drink.”

“I just mean...if I drink something, I’m gonna be here *a while* to make sure it wears off before I drive anywhere.”

“What do I care? You can crash on the couch if it comes to that, no one will mind.” She looks him in the eye. “And honestly? You seem like you kinda need a drink after tonight.”

Well. She’s right. “Vodka cranberry,” Andre decides.

Trina mixes them a couple of drinks and they sit down on the couch together. Andre takes in the apartment. It's actually kind of cute. It's clear that Sinjin and Burf have better taste than Tanner; the furniture isn't anything fancy, but it's a step up from Wanko's. Andre thinks he recognizes some of the decorations as pieces of Hollywood Arts sets that the two boys must have worked on. The place has character.

"You know, I never would've thought of Sinjin as gay until I saw this place," Andre muses.

Trina laughs. "Oh, he's not gay. The way he pursued girls in high school wasn't *all* an act." She shakes her head. "But Burf is his soulmate or whatever. I mean, have you ever seen two people more clearly made for each other?"

Well...Andre isn't about to suggest that Trina's sister is more perfectly matched with her girlfriend, even if he kinda believes it. "No, I guess you're right," he says.

"So, what's going on with you, anyway? You're single?"

"Yeah..." Andre says slowly.

"And studying what, music?"

"Right. Music industry."

"So what's that like?"

Surprised, Andre tells her a little bit about what he's studying. She seems interested, receptive. It honestly feels like the most normal conversation he's had in a while.

"Well, I think you're definitely in the right major."

"I'm sorry." Andre shakes his head. He's finished his drink, and maybe that's why he's blunt enough to just *say* it. "When did you get so *normal*?"

"What are you talking about?" Trina asks, looking a little affronted.

"I just mean, you've never given a shit about what I'm into."

"Because you're my little sister's best friend. It's not like you ever gave me the time of day either."

"Because you—" *were crazy*. He shakes his head. "I mean, I can remember *trying*. When we got paired up to work together."

"Yeah, and look at where that got me. A swollen tongue and Tori stealing the show."

"That wasn't my fault!"

"I never said it was!"

"Well, sorry I even asked."

“Okay, fine. I know what you’re getting at. I’ve always been a powerhouse of talent.” Andre barely suppresses rolling his eyes. “But I have to say, I never felt like my talents were appreciated until I got into Northridge College.”

“What are you studying?” Andre asks, realizing he doesn’t know.

“Theater, of course. And I think I really have a knack for directing.”

And, actually. Andre can see this. Even if Trina has never been able to act in a way that is at all convincing, she’s always been someone who is confident in what she wants and how she feels. Andre thinks if she can hone that into evoking results from other people, it might be something. “Got it,” he replies.

“It took some time to get there,” Trina tells him. “But by my sophomore year I started figuring it out. Like I started to feel at home in my body again for the first time in a long time around then, too.” Andre nods along. It makes sense. “I think starting to live here most of the time really helped. Don’t get me wrong, I love my family, but I think it’s better for me if I’m somewhere on my own. Tori and I get too competitive. And my parents, well, they trust me to be an adult no matter where I am.”

Andre thinks that Tori has never actually competed with Trina, but he’s not going to say that. “That’s really great for you,” he tells her genuinely.

They talk a little more. It’s *shockingly* easy. He’s never, *ever*, going to tell Tori about this.

And he’s *especially* never going to tell Tori about the kiss.

They’ve both had a drink, though they’re certainly not drunk. But Andre is not about to deny that Trina is *very* easy on the eyes. And this new and improved Trina, who isn’t a screeching basket case...well, he’s not mad when she leans over and kisses him.

But still, he pulls away. “This is a mistake,” he tells her. He knows people always say the crazier the girl, the better the sex, but he’s not sure he wants to find out from *Trina*.

“So what?” she replies. “We’re young. We’re allowed to make them.”

She makes a convincing argument.

And he’s *definitely*, never, ever, *ever*, telling Tori what happens when he and Trina go back to her bedroom, and he doesn’t leave until the next morning.

It’s a mistake. One they both vow to never repeat. And one they both promise to keep a secret.

Trina’s right. They’re allowed to make mistakes sometimes.

At least this one was kind of fun.

Tori hadn't anticipated just how much the fact that their breaks don't overlap would affect her and Jade, but somehow it's made things extra fraught between them. It's been a hard semester, something Tori worried about early on, and something that has come to fruition almost exactly as she warily predicted: they're both so busy that even nightly phone calls have fallen by the wayside, because of exhaustion, or just being so wrung out from all their school work that it's hard to even maintain a coherent conversation. It's easier to skip the phone call and just fall into bed and send a couple of good night texts.

They also used to spend more time together, in previous semesters, just doing homework at one or the other's house, just to be together, but even that has started to feel like a hassle; they either have to wake up early enough for one of them to drive home just to get ready for school or to jostle each other for time in the bathroom, and even in the latter case, that's dependent on them not forgetting something at their house that necessitates driving home anyway. Some days, the commute itself to school is so brutal that the few minutes they get in the morning together, grumpy and taciturn over coffee, doesn't feel worth it.

Tori *hates* feeling this way, like every moment with Jade isn't a privilege and a treasure, but it's hard to be excited about routines that feel more like checking boxes than building something meaningful.

And spring break doesn't help. Jade becomes so focused on a random, extraneous project that they barely get time together during her break, only that Friday night, after Beck's party. Jade has to spend the rest of the weekend finishing up homework she neglected so she could spend her break doing something else entirely, something that Tori couldn't even be involved in. Tori tries her best not to be bitter, but it's hard.

Then Jade is back to school while Tori is off. Tori suggests various things they can do, while she has free time, that maybe Jade could have time for, but Jade claims to be too busy. Which is probably true. It's getting later in the semester, Tori knows her own workload is piling up.

But it isn't until the full moon on Saturday that she really sees Jade during her own break, just as it's coming to an end.

They go to Shadow Creek Park as a group on Saturday, the second night of the full moon, which is great, though of course it isn't much of a chance for intimate time together. Jade had claimed to be busy with homework during the day, and Tori hopes this means she'll have time to spend together tomorrow, especially since she'd already flaked on their plans to spend last night together.

Jade seems like her normal self, maybe a little grumpier than usual, and somehow, even she and Cat are talking about school as they get into the car to leave. Tori can't believe it. They're not even upperclassmen yet, and it feels like their lives have absolutely been taken over by college. Didn't some people work full time jobs when they were in school? Tori can't imagine. And they all *should* have a leg up in their programs because of their education at Hollywood Arts, but it doesn't seem to help that much. Or maybe it just makes them perfectionists. Tori knows she can be one, and *certainly* Jade has the same tendency. Other students might shoot for good enough, but not them.

It's hard to worry that much about homework when you're a wolf, though. Tori enjoys an energetic and joyful night in the park with her friends. It's spring, it's getting warmer, the scents of new life fill the air. It's funny that the season of new beginnings should also mark an ending.

An ending of a semester, Tori means. Not anything else.

But maybe that night under the moon rejuvenates her, because she approaches Jade the next day with a renewed fervor to connect with her, to at least have *something* good come of this spring break. Tori needs reassurance. It wasn't actually *that* long ago that they agreed to talk if anything started to feel too difficult. Maybe Jade hasn't realized they're at that point, but Tori's starting to worry they might be.

After breakfast at a diner, Sam, Cat and Carly head home. Jade seems to be making a move to do so as well.

"Hey, wait," Tori coaxes, "Come spend some time with me." She can't believe she even has to ask. At least a nap after Shadow Creek Park is pretty standard for them.

Jade sighs. "No offense, Tori, but I'm not really in the mood."

"You're not in the mood to spend time with me? For a nap?"

"No. I'm not...I can't have sex right now, okay?"

"Who said anything about sex?"

Jade looks a little sour and defensive. "I know how you get around the full moon."

She's *not* wrong, but this hadn't been Tori's motivation at all. "I just want to see you. I already finished all my homework over this break because I hoped we might get to spend some time together this weekend."

"Well, I'm pretty busy," Jade answers flatly.

It...hurts to be brushed off by Jade in a way she hasn't been for so long. "Look, fine, you don't have to stay. But can we just talk for a minute?"

Jade huffs. It's subdued, but Tori still hears it. She feels a spark of anger in her stomach, but does her best not to let it show. "Fine," Jade says evenly. "Let's talk."

They sit down on the living room couches. Separate couches. This really feels off. Tori has a bad feeling in the pit of her stomach. There's so much she wants to say, but she has to start with, "Why do I feel like you're avoiding me?"

Jade looks away. "I just have a lot on my plate right now."

"I know that. So do I. But we've both always valued our time together during the full moon. It feels like that changed."

“You yourself said there might come a time when we might not be able to celebrate every full moon the way we used to,” Jade points out.

“I know, but...” *I didn’t mean it with you.* “I’m not asking for anything special. Just...some time.”

“And I don’t have it.”

Tori’s temper flares. She can tell Jade is being stubborn and obtuse, on purpose. She knows her well enough. “Well you had *plenty* of it when Freddie was in town,” she fires back.

“I was on *spring break*.”

“And I tried to hang out with you then, too, but you wanted to work on your thing with *him* instead!”

“He was only going to be in town a few days! I didn’t have very long to prepare.”

“You could have made different decisions that *included* me!”

“Oh, and how would I do that, Tori? Fake a death in the family so I could take my spring break with yours? Maybe *you* could have made different decisions.”

“I *tried* to spend time with you! And I’m trying right now!” Tori folds her arms. “And there was a time not that long ago that you probably *would* have faked a death in the family for me. Now, you’d rather film Robbie having a wet dream or whatever.”

“Our breaks didn’t align, so I had to make my own plans,” Jade says through gritted teeth.

“And I really, *really* wish our breaks were at the same time. Because I *miss* you. Can you even say the same?”

“Of course I miss you.” Jade tone is almost monotone.

“Well, I guess you missed Freddie more,” Tori says sarcastically.

“*Why* do you keep bringing him up?” Jade groans.

“Because I can *tell* he’s a sore spot for you. *Why?*”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” There’s an edge of anxiety to her tone. Of anger.

“You spent more of your spring break with him than with me! Which, fine, some of that makes sense since you both weren’t in school. But then all of a sudden you got really *weird* about him, and I overheard him telling someone at Beck’s party that he must’ve done something to piss you off because you were clearly mad at him, but he had no idea what. And then I watched you just be unnecessarily mean to him. I can *tell* something happened!”

“Nothing *happened!*” Jade insists.

She doesn't want to ask. She doesn't even really know if she wants the answer, and she knows Jade probably doesn't want to give it, but she asks anyway. "Do you have a crush on Freddie?"

"No," Jade snarls.

But Tori can tell right away that it's a lie. And it's not even some wolf sense that gives it away. It's Jade herself. Jade, whose command of repressed emotion and whose acting chops are formidable, gives herself away completely with the look in her eye, the tone of her voice, and the fact that she can't even *look* at Tori. "I knew it," Tori whispers.

Jade stewes for a long moment, as if she hopes Tori will just let it go, but finally she throws up her hands. "All right, *fine*, *yes*, I have a stupid crush on Freddie, I fucking hate myself, what else is new?"

"Why would you *keep* that from me?" Tori asks, even though she knows the answer. She and Jade talked about this, a long time ago. She knows that Jade isn't comfortable with crushes when she's devoted to someone else. But if it's making her *treat* Tori differently...

"Because I'm already miserable enough without sharing it!"

It's hard to stay mad when Jade is this upset, but Tori *is* angry. "I just don't understand why you were *avoiding* me."

"Because of *exactly* this reason, do you think I wanted you to *know* this?"

"Are you cheating on me with Freddie?"

"No!" Her eyes flash hurt. Like Tori should know that she never would.

But Tori doesn't know. "Then what the fuck is your problem?"

"My problem is—" Jade takes a deep breath. "It changes how I *feel* about you."

Tori goes still. Cold. "What are you talking about?" she asks numbly.

Jade shakes her head, keeps shaking it. "All we do right now," she says in a tight voice, "is never see each other, promise it'll change, it never does. I'm so used to missing you that sometimes I don't even *feel* it anymore. I can't miss something I never have."

"I—" But what even is there to say to something like that? Tori clamps her jaw shut.

"I'm not like Cat," Jade says, in a measured voice that barely reigns in her misery. "When I have a crush, it's a signal. It's a red flag. It means something is *wrong*."

"You don't know that," Tori whispers. Surely Jade isn't some kind of *superhuman* who never even fantasizes about anyone else when she's in love? Tori certainly has, even if she hasn't had a *crush*, per se. But other people are hot.

“I do,” Jade answers. “Because being around Freddie...woke me up. It *excited* me. And I couldn’t remember the last time I felt that with you.”

Tori feels like she’s been punched in the sternum, like the impact of it broke her ribs. She can hardly breathe. She certainly can’t speak.

“I tried to feel that with you again, but...”

*The sex.* That sex they’d had after Beck’s party. Tori had thought it was great. She hadn’t realized Jade had been somewhere else entirely, in her own mind. Maybe Tori had been too drunk to read her properly. Maybe she’d been too hopeful. Maybe she’d just been too goddamn *grateful* to have a night alone with Jade in her bed that she took what she could get without thinking or worrying about anything else. “But...I...”

Jade says nothing. She just twists her hands and stares at the floor.

“Are you...breaking up with me?” Tori asks. Every word feels painful. Like her tongue is a razorblade inside her own mouth.

Jade gives her a level look, blue eyes searching. It feels like there’s no warmth at all in them, until there is, just a spark of it, just as Jade drops her gaze. “No,” she answers quietly.

“Then—I—what should we—”

“I just need time,” Jade answers.

“To do *what*? Choose between Freddie and me?” She doesn’t mean to sound so bitter.

“No,” Jade scoffs. “If having no time is the problem, why would I want to be with someone even *further* away?”

“You see him about as often as you see me,” Tori bites.

“It’s not about him. He’s just a symptom.” She sighs, heavily. “I need to figure out if I have the energy to keep fighting for us.”

“I’m not ready to give up fighting,” Tori vows.

“I know.” Jade glares off to the side. “That’s why I didn’t want to fucking *talk* about this.”

“You’d rather have *blindsided* me? I thought we were supposed to *talk* when things got hard!”

“Would you have been surprised?” Jade asks. “Tell me, when do you even think things got hard between us?”

Tori doesn’t have an answer. It had been insidious, creeping, until suddenly here it is, standing in front of them, between them, an abrupt *barrier*, a *conflict*. Something they can’t resolve with a simple conversation, something Tori didn’t quite foresee when they’d talked a few months ago.



How could she have foreseen this? But also, how could she have *not*?

*Fuck.*

“I’m going to go,” Jade says abruptly, standing up.

“Okay,” Tori says weakly. She wants to tell Jade she loves her. She wants to convince her to stay, to *beg* her, to tie her up and *keep* her from going anywhere. She does none of it. She just numbly watches as Jade walks steadily out the front door, with just a moment’s pause to look back at Tori, and then she’s gone.

Maybe Jade hasn’t broken up with her, but it sure feels that way to Tori.

She sits on the couch, unable to move. She doesn’t know how long she sits, mentally probing the hollow recess of her empty chest, pushing harder on the spots that hurt, but the sound of the patio door opening snaps her out of it.

She leaps to her feet, instinctual, ready to face a threat. But it’s... Trina?

“What are you doing here?”

Trina scowls. “I live here?”

“I didn’t know you were home.”

“Just because you didn’t notice my entire *car* in the driveway, that’s not my fault.”

“Why are you even awake?” It’s *early*. At least earlier than Trina usually is awake, in her experience.

“I was doing sun yoga out by the pool.”

“*Sun* yoga?!”

“Yeah. It’s refreshing,” Trina sneers.

Tori does not have time to puzzle out any more of Trina’s weirdness. “Okay, well.” But she doesn’t have the energy to think of a jab, either.

Trina glances around, seems to be sniffing slightly. “Is she gone?”

“Who?”

“Jade.”

A sharp pang in her chest. “Yeah, she left.”

Trina nods slowly. “That sounded rough,” she says sympathetically.

Tori draws in a sharp breath. “How much did you hear?”

Trina presses her mouth together. “All of it.”

“Were you *listening* at the door?”

“No. The kitchen window is open.”

*Son of a bitch.* It is. Tori presses her mouth together in fury. “Great. The worst moment of my life, and you hear the whole thing.”

Trina laughs scornfully. “Oh, no, the time you got dog-dragged while singing the national anthem was *much* worse.”

Tori glares. “Not making me feel any better.”

Trina’s expression turns sympathetic. “I’m sorry,” she offers. And it’s...genuine.

“Thanks,” Tori replies in a softer tone.

But then Trina shifts gears. “Is Freddie still single?”

Tori blanches. “I don’t know?”

“Hmm,” Trina replies. “Sounds like he’s not going to be on the market for long.”

“*Trina!* What the *fuck?!?*”

“Oh my god, *relax*, I’m *kidding*.” She shakes her head. “Just give your idiot girlfriend some space. She’ll come around.”

“That’s what I was planning to do anyway,” Tori replies heavily.

“Well, then. Good.”

They stare at each other. “Was...that all?” Tori asks.

“Yep. I guess so.”

“Uh. Good chat,” Tori says, heading up to her room.

“You’ve got that girl wrapped around your finger,” Trina surprises her by adding. Tori turns to stare incredulously, because it sure as *hell* doesn’t feel like it now. “Seriously. You’re going to be fine.”

“I hope you’re right.”

She scurries upstairs before Trina can attempt anything else like a heart to heart.

Tori naps for a few hours, because she has no idea what else to do, but wakes up when Carly texts her, asking if Tori wants to meet up to study for a few hours for a psychology test they have on Monday (she, Carly and Andre all ended up taking another psych elective together this semester because they’d actually really enjoyed the first one). Tori already did some

studying over the break, but hey, it's not like she has anything else going on today, so she accepts.

They meet up at the Jet Brew near campus, since it's a fair drive for both of them; Tori wonders how much time she and Jade might have together if they lived somewhere without constant horrendous traffic.

Carly is already there when she arrives, and she smiles brightly and waves. It coaxes a slight smile out of Tori as well. She orders her drink and approaches the table Carly is already sitting at, a latte in front of her.

"Where's Andre?" Tori asks. She'd kind of assumed he was invited, too, since they often study all together.

"Oh." Carly scrunches her nose slightly. "He said he was busy."

Tori blinks. "That's it? No other explanation?"

Carly shrugs. "All he replied with was 'Can't. Busy.'" She drops her voice into a silly mimic of their friend.

"He's usually not so..." Tori is too tired to think of the word she wants.

"Aloof?" Carly suggests. Tori nods. Close enough. "Yeah, that's what I thought. The only thing I could think of is that maybe he's with a girl and doesn't want her to see him texting *another* girl or something."

Tori guesses that tracks. Though she'd have thought Andre would tell her if he was seeing someone new. But maybe it's still early.

The barista calls her name, and she takes the seat across from Carly. They start working through the material, going over the study guide their professor gave them. The hardest part for Tori is always verbalizing definitions and concepts that she *knows* she understands. That's part of why these study sessions help. Having to work to explain things to each other helps prepare them for various short answer and essay questions on their tests.

But today, she's struggling. Maybe it's the lack of sleep. But who is she kidding, it's because all she can think about is the way Jade walked out this morning, and how much it hurt.

"No, wait," Carly frowns. "We had negative reinforcement down last week. It's not the same thing as punishment."

"Oh, right," Tori says. She absolutely knows this is true, but she is drawing a complete blank at what it could possibly be instead.

"So positive reinforcement adds a beneficial stimulus after a behavior to strengthen the response..." Carly prompts, clearly hoping this will help Tori get on track.

"Then negative reinforcement..." But all Tori can think about is how much it hurt to watch Jade walk away. How it feels like Jade is *punishing* her...for what? For being in school? Jade

is in school, too. For being a werewolf and needing to spend time as one? Jade has always loved that about her.

What behavior of hers is Jade trying to change by adding a negative response? But wait, adding a negative response *isn't* negative reinforcement, what *is* it?

Whatever Jade wants her to do, if she comes back to Tori, if she takes away her loneliness and heartache, Tori will do anything. And she has it. "It's lessening a negative stimulus to strengthen a response," Tori tells Carly,

And then, she bursts into tears.

She can see Carly glance around the room with slightly panicked eyes, then grin disarmingly at people who are surely staring, but Tori can't stop. She hasn't cried since she and Jade parted this morning. Not really, not like this. But now it's like everything is pouring out of her, and she just can't get control.

Carly quietly gathers their papers and books, and gently coaxes Tori out of the coffee shop. They move to the side of the building, so Tori isn't just standing in the middle of the sidewalk bawling her eyes out. But not too close to the dumpsters, because those stink.

"I'm sorry," Tori blubbers.

"What are you sorry for?" Carly asks. "What happened?"

Tori takes in the way Carly is standing there, her messenger bag slung over one shoulder, Tori's monster purse over the other, holding both of their coffees and gazing at her with compassionate eyes, and it only seems to redouble her tears. But finally, she says, "It's Jade."

Carly's expression shifts to concern. "Oh, no," she says quietly. "What happened to her?"

Tori shrugs, twists her mouth. "I don't know. She just...she told me she needs time. To even figure out if she wants to *be* with me anymore." She dissolves into more sobs.

Carly carefully balances one coffee on top of the other and digs around in her messenger bag to pull out a pack of tissues and hands them to Tori. Tori, embarrassed, does her best to get control of herself. "How much do you want to talk about it?" Carly asks.

Tori shakes her head for a long moment, thinking. She doesn't want to mention Freddie; she doesn't want any rumors to get around. So she settles on, "She got a crush on a guy and I guess it made her re-evaluate what we have."

"Oh." Carly stands up a little straighter. "Oh, god. I'm sorry." Her tone is tentative. Almost defensive.

Tori thinks she understands why. "It's not—I don't have a problem with it being a guy," she tries to explain. "I don't care about that part. I don't even really care about the *crush*, I just care that...it's made her need *space* from me..."

Carly seems to relax a little at that, and continues to give Tori her sympathetic attention. "Have things been rough between you lately?"

Tori shakes her head. "We've just both been so *busy*. We haven't had enough time for each other, and I know that. We both know that. I just thought we were on the same page because we know how busy school is. And we also know it's temporary."

Carly just nods. "School can be rough on relationships."

Tori remembers hearing the arguments with Sam, Cat, and Carly during the full moon last semester. She gazes at Carly, suddenly worried she's missed something with her friends. "Oh my god. Are you three okay?"

Carly chuckles humorlessly and shakes her head. "Yeah, we're—Like I said, it's rough. We've been doing our best to figure out how to balance everything, but even *living* together it feels like we don't get enough time. Or the time we do get is wasted on arguments and housework. I was just telling Cat last night that I felt like she and I hadn't really had some quality time to ourselves since Valentine's Day."

Tori nods gravely. "I know how that feels."

Carly smiles weakly. "I know I'm not Jade. But...I am someone who spent a long time separated from the person I loved most in the world." Tori listens, feeling a bit foolish, knowing whatever she's feeling now can't be *half* as devastating as when Carly and Sam stopped talking. But Carly doesn't say anything to suggest that Tori's pain is silly, she just continues. "Sometimes I couldn't understand how I could just go on living my life without her. But you know what? It took some time, it took some baby steps, but Sam and I made it back to each other. And now we get to be together again, every day." Her expression twists sourly. "Even if she also drives me completely *crazy* every day with her laundry chair and the way she leaves dirty dishes all over the house."

Tori laughs softly. "I kind of think living with Jade would be a rude awakening in some ways."

"Probably for you both," Carly admits. "I guess all I'm trying to say is, if it's supposed to happen, Jade will come back to you." She shrugs. "You two built something really special together. I think it'll take more than some guy and a rough couple of months to tear that down."

"I really hope you're right," Tori says softly. She offers Carly the closest thing to a smile that she can manage. "Thank you."

"Of course," Carly says. "If you take your coffee back, I can hug you."

Tori's laugh is more genuine this time, and she takes Carly up on the offer of a hug. It feels good, for the first time in a while, to feel like someone is there to listen to her, to hold her, to lift her up. To feel like someone *sees* her, like someone understands her heart.

She soaks in the comfort Carly offers her, hoping beyond hope that Carly is right, and that Jade will be back to be that person for her again soon.

-

Jade feels nothing.

At least, it's easiest to let herself operate that way.

And besides, she thinks she's still in shock from that conversation with Tori.

It's not like she *wanted* to ask for space, for a break. Not a break-up, just...some time. She hadn't wanted to talk about this at all. She knows that they'd talked a few months ago about how important it was to talk to each other if things got difficult, but...Jade had felt like this was largely her problem. Not Tori's. If she could have just handled it herself with Tori *pressing* her, *insisting* that she confess something that *didn't even need to be discussed*, then maybe she could have just *dealt* with things on her own for a bit, and been fine.

Stupid full moon. If they hadn't all gotten together for their monthly ritual, Tori probably never would have noticed a thing. It's not like they saw each other regularly enough for her to be able to tell if Jade is especially moody or not.

And now they won't be seeing each other at all, for a while.

Jade feels a sharp *pang* in her guts at the thought.

But what difference does it make? Nothing has changed, except that they had a difficult conversation. Jade got what she wanted. A chance to figure out how and *if* she can even handle this anymore.

She doesn't know why it doesn't make her feel any better.

Jade works on homework. Because what else is she supposed to do?

It's when she gets in bed that night that the first real ache hits her, when she picks up her phone to text Tori good night, a reflex more than anything.

No, they don't do that anymore. Not right now. But in spite of everything, Jade *wants* to reach out, to tether herself to Tori in the simplest way: for them both to know, over time and space, that the other is thinking about them.

Instead, she throws her phone across the room and turns away from it in bed, refusing to cry, staring at the darkness behind her eyelids until she finally falls asleep.

The next day is easier.

Who knew how much easier school would be when she isn't spending her free moments missing Tori, trying to figure out how she can fit into her life? Her life gets to be just *Jade* now. Just school, and homework, and navigating traffic for a decent cup of coffee, and

ignoring her mom's attempts to bond and be an attentive parent, and yelling at her brother for making a sandwich with the last of the bread and not moving the next loaf out of the freezer.

Okay. Just Jade kind of sucks. But at least she knows what to expect when her time is all *hers*.

As the week goes on, she gets ahead on her homework, to the point that she actually has time on Wednesday to look through more of the footage from the short film, so start to think about how she wants to edit it together.

But just looking at it makes her feel sick to her stomach.

She *hates* the way that all of Freddie's shots look so good, that his prowess is so clear. She *hates* remembering his handsome face and capable hands, the way he hadn't been intimidated by her (at least, he wasn't until she started actively pushing him away). She hates the creeping fantasies of the *physicality* of him, of the notion that they could be so *hot* together, that he would probably do *whatever* she asked him to do, just to please her.

She hates it most of all because despite the fact that these thoughts are arousing, she also knows just as keenly how much she *doesn't* want this. How violently her mind rejects the pleasure her body is so keen to explore.

She doesn't want him. She wants *Tori*.

Well, she can't have either of them right now, anyway, so it's moot.

She shuts down her FilmSplice program and pushes away from her desk, then flops onto her bed and screams into her pillow.

She doesn't even know how to quantify her misery.

But yet, her body's needs remain, like a constant prodding in her mind.

Jade gives in, hand slipping into her pants, the swirls of her fingers bringing her relief in minutes.

It's all she can do not to cry when she's finished. She'd never really been ashamed of masturbation. Her mom had drilled into her head to a mortifying degree the fact that it's healthy and natural. This kind of shame welling up after release isn't common for her. In fact, she doesn't think she's felt so bad after masturbating since...

...since the first time she got off thinking about women while she was dating Beck. Not *Tori*, per se. But. A woman. A generic woman.

It's not like Jade considers fantasies like this *cheating*. She knows that's stupid. At least, *now* she does; when she was younger, she'd certainly tried to police Beck's sexual fantasies, though the realization that it was all moot when he came out had done a lot to rid her of that notion. But Jade doesn't like to think about things she doesn't actually *want*. Jade likes to keep her fantasies grounded in reality.

There are a lot of things Jade hates, and embracing everything in this world that she despises makes the things she *doesn't* hate that much more valuable, more wonderful. And Jade has always wanted to fantasize about the things that bring her this kind of rare joy. Not things that ultimately lead to despair, to an unfulfillable longing.

She's already disappointed enough that she'll never have sex with Joan Jett, she doesn't need to add more people to that list. Why waste energy on people and things that are ultimately meaningless?

Jade has always been someone who knows what she wants, and has a plan to pursue it. Even if a lot of her confidence has to be forced some of the time, her goal-driven nature is a constant. And that even extends to her fantasies. Unless she's dreaming up a fucked-up storyline for a film, she prefers to keep her focus on what she actually *wants*.

But *want* can be such a subjective term. So sometimes, it's safer to just not want anything at all.

If Jade tries hard enough, she can make this true.

She manages to convince herself of this for two more days, until Friday afternoon, when she's done all the homework she can and doesn't know what to do with herself but stare at the ceiling.

And she lets the reality of missing Tori Vega slip and settle into her heart, and latch there, with velcro-like burrs, so that if she tries to deny it again, it will shred her heart on its way out.

*This is stupid.*

She'd thought that asking for space would just emphasize how little they actually mean to each other anymore. She'd thought that she'd go through a week, and feel the same, and would find herself wondering what there even was left to fight for, because with or without Tori, her life was the same.

But it's not. Even if Jade doesn't *physically* see Tori as much as she would like, there's an even more poignant sense of absence to know that they're cut off from each other. That communications are shut down. That there's no *potential*. No *chance* of even a few fleeting moments and some kisses before falling asleep together.

No cuddling. No sex. No trying to concentrate on her own homework and getting annoyed because Tori is across the room humming, or tapping her pencil, or jiggling her foot, those stupid nerdy glasses slipping down her nose.

No high-cheekboned smiles. No brown eyes, warm and sweet the way Jade takes her coffee, connecting with hers. No lean fingers wrapped around her own, long limbs wrapped around her body. No cheery texts to let Jade know Tori is thinking about her. No silly questions. No wolf head nuzzling her palm, wolf fur pressing against her skin.



The fervor of missing Tori fills Jade with only one goal: to never lose her again. Because, damn it, it *does* matter that they're devoted to each other. Even if it isn't perfect. Even if it hurts to miss each other. If there's even a *chance* of making this work, long term, Jade is going to try.

Because the pain of losing Tori completely isn't the *good* kind of pain, the kind that makes a reunion that much sweeter. It's despair.

She immediately texts Tori that she wants to talk. Tori just as quickly replies that she's coming over.

She answers the door when Tori rings the bell. They stare at each other for a long moment, neither of them speaking, until Jade murmurs, "Come on," and guides Tori down to her bedroom.

She shuts the door behind them. Tori is looking at her, fear and love warring on her face.

Jade shakes her head. "I'm so sorry," she says, and reaches for her.

Tori is already there, arms slipping around her, lips meeting hers in a bumping of teeth, Jade's lip caught between them, but Jade doesn't even care, she just cares about the way Tori kisses her, hands all over her. Jade pushes away from the door, but it's Tori who guides her to the bed, Tori who shoves her down, Tori who starts pushing at her clothes. Jade can only help them both along the way, tugging off clothes, murmuring curses and encouragement in Tori's ear, scratching at her back with her nails.

Things are a blur of skin and sensation as clothes come off, and just as quickly, Jade feels as Tori pushes two fingers inside of her, with no preamble, a sensation straddling the line between pain and pleasure, but Jade welcomes it, welcomes Tori back, welcomes any pain that clarifies the reality that her absence hurts *worse*.

And then it's Tori inside of her, other hand firm on her shoulder, holding her down, teeth at her breasts, growling in her ear, and the ferocity feels like the full moon sex they missed out on, but ramped up, elevated by desperation, but regret, maybe even by anger, but Jade's orgasm feels built out of all of them, yet leaves her filled with laughter.

And when she's finished, Tori just as quickly withdraws her fingers to touch herself, her face still buried in Jade's breasts, this time holding Jade down with a hand on one of her wrists, and all Jade can do is hold onto her as she finishes herself off, as if she's depriving Jade of the pleasure.

They hold each other in the aftermath. Tori is still breathing hard, keeping her face pressed against Jade's skin, until finally, she looks at Jade. Her gaze is apprehensive.

"Are we...?" she finally asks, though she doesn't finish the thought.

Jade had thought she'd made clear that she wants her, but then realizes how many different ways her apology could be interpreted, realizes Tori may literally not know whether they just

had breakup sex or makeup sex. She presses a gentle kiss to Tori's nose. "We're okay," she assures Tori.

A slow smile tugs across Tori's face. "Yeah?" she asks.

"Yeah," Jade chuckles softly.

They hold each other for a long time. Jade closes her eyes. She feels *content*, in a way she hasn't for so long.

"I'm sorry," she repeats quietly.

She can feel Tori shake her head against her shoulder. "I'm just glad to see you. I've *missed* you."

"Me, too."

Tori lifts herself up on her elbow a little. "Can I ask...what happened?"

Jade takes a deep breath. She doesn't know how to condense all the thoughts and feelings she'd wrestled with over the past week. All she really knows is, "I think it took actually *not* having you to help me realize how much I actually need you to be a part of my life. It's not perfect. We spend far too much time apart." Tori nods vigorously at this. "But I missed you so goddamn much when I couldn't even text you, when I didn't know when I was going to see you next. I'd rather have the *hope* of you, than none of you at all."

"Me, too," Tori says softly. "That's all I want. Just a chance with you."

"I'm not giving up on us," Jade vows, and to her surprise and shame, the tears come.

"Jade," Tori says softly, reaching for her cheek.

Jade hisses in a frustrated breath as more tears fall. "I'll fight for us, but we *have* to do better."

"I agree," Tori replies. Jade is startled to see she's teary-eyed, too. "We'll find ways to prioritize each other. I'll try harder."

They hold each other, Jade wiping away tears, trying not to let any evidence of them show on her face, until finally, she murmurs, "Tori?"

"Hmm?"

"Will you...look at me while you fuck me?"

Almost instantly, Tori rolls on top of her, gazing down at her with a slight smile and tear stained cheeks. "I'll do anything you want," she whispers.

This time, the only moments they lose sight of each other are when they get lost in their kisses.



# Decay

**April 2015 - May 2015**

A few weeks go by, and it feels to Tori like she and Jade are starting to find their footing once again.

Things certainly aren't perfect, but it feels like they're at least both on the same page of accepting what is and what can be right now. It's a very busy part of the semester still, for both of them. But they're both trying their hardest to find the pockets of time to spend together. Even if it's just eating takeout together after a day of classes and not even reading any homework while they eat, and putting on a movie after they finish their homework (even if they inevitably fall asleep during the movie). The threat of losing each other has certainly changed Tori's perspective, and it seems to have changed Jade's; the time she gets to spend with Jade, even if they're not doing very much that's exciting, feels a lot less routine, a lot more worth the effort.

Tori doesn't yet know how they'll maintain this kind of thing for the next two years of college, but at least right now, things feel better.

Toward the end of the month, she and Carly are supposed to perform a short one-act play together. It's not really for a grade, but they will get extra credit; they were asked by a classmate to perform the scene to demonstrate the technical work put into the stage design. Essentially, it's far more about the props than the acting, which frees them both up to have *fun* with it.

And they do. Tori veers into melodrama, with big emotions and hammy deliveries, while Carly's performance is almost absurdly straightforward to provide a contrast. At least, that's what Tori thinks she's going for.

The final part of the short play involves something of a stunt (though it's more the set *itself* that performs it in a Rube Goldberg sort of way rather than either of the actors), and Carly's character winds up mortally wounded. As she performs her dying monologue in Tori's arms, her style shifts to abruptly...*heartwarming*? It's strange and jarring, but it's *effective*, and Tori finds herself naturally tearing up, not even having to rely on the tricks that always work to bring on the waterworks.

They hold the final moment, holding each other, gazing into each other's eyes, an onstage intimacy that abruptly no longer feels very playful.

Tori's stomach flips.

When the scene is over, Carly's haunting expression of longing instantly shifts into a broad grin. "That was *fantastic*," she praises Tori. "I didn't know you could make yourself cry!"

"Of course I can," Tori laughs weakly, not about to admit that in *this* case, she didn't have to. "It's easy."

“Hm,” Carly hums neutrally. “It’s not even that easy for me to cry for *real*. Though, I’m not as emotionally stunted as Sam.” Though her delivery is as dry as ever, her grin shows that she’s being a bit facetious.

“Well, you definitely can’t be emotionally stunted to have delivered *that* final monologue,” Tori praises.

Carly grins wickedly. “Was that good? I wanted that to be when my character really felt like she came alive. When she was dying. Get it?”

“Clever,” Tori admits. She wishes she’d done something more interesting than just going over the top. Though Carly is more interested in production or digital media than acting, it’s clear to Tori that she took this role more seriously than Tori did and actually *thought* about it.

Tori admires her for that, even as she regrets her choice to treat this experience a bit flippantly. To be fair, she hadn’t known Carly was doing very much, and she wouldn’t have wanted to come in so polished that Carly looked *inept* in comparison. Although, she’d also maybe underestimated Carly.

But instead of having a complete identity crisis around imposter syndrome, Tori just...*feels* a lot, about that moment with Carly, about Carly’s skill, about Carly’s humor...Tori feels...

Tori feels like she understands much better what had happened to Jade earlier this month when she worked closely with Freddie. And it had happened to her in mere *moments*.

But it’s so...*silly*. She’s worked closely with plenty of actors before. Starting way back when she played Beck’s love interest in that play where the zombie mask was stuck on her face. Though...Beck isn’t someone she’s attracted to. But she’d played Jade’s spouse before they ever got together. Though...that was a role they *both* clearly struggled with, for reasons that felt incredibly obvious later on.

Okay, those are bad examples. She’s worked with other people in her acting program. She’s even acted with *Carly* before, and nothing like this has ever happened to her.

Tori stops herself from spiraling into a concern that her career pursuits are going to have her developing deep crushes every time she has to work with someone attractive. It clearly takes more than just a pretty face and acting talent for Tori to get crushed out. Though what else there is, Tori can’t really put her finger on it.

Maybe it has something to do with the way Carly made her feel *cared* for, earlier this month, when she’d cried all over her at Jet Brew. Maybe that kind of intimacy made Tori feel special in a new way somehow, worthy of affection and attention, and it had time to percolate in her heart into a crush, when Carly *looked* at her in that compassionate way again.

Ironically, Tori thinks Jade would *love* the percolating coffee metaphor as an explanation for how crushes work.

Either way, she now feels incredibly awkward, like if she looks at Carly too long, Carly will suddenly be able to figure out how Tori feels about her. Not that it...it’s just a *crush*. It will

go away on its own. Tori will just do her best to enjoy it.

And definitely *not* tell Jade about it. Because Jade had informed her, in no uncertain terms, that she would rather not know. Tori will respect that. Especially given how recently Jade's crush tested the mettle of their relationship.

Tori carries it around with her like a pleasurable ache for the next week or so, waiting for it to subside. It doesn't. Probably because she sees Carly basically every day. More often than she sees Jade. But it's not like she feels any less for Jade, either. In fact, it kind of makes her miss Jade *more*. And since the moon is getting fuller in the sky, she's spending...a lot more time with her right hand. Thinking thoughts she *definitely* doesn't want anyone else to know about.

Tori is good at keeping secrets. So it's not the fear that she'll accidentally reveal it that makes her decide she needs to tell someone. It's because it feels like the only way to make it feel *less* powerful.

She can't tell Jade without hurting her feelings. She can't tell Sam without getting hurt *herself*. And she certainly doesn't need to burden Carly with this information.

She decides to tell Cat. Cat doesn't have the best track record with secrets herself, but...ever since she got a werewolf for a girlfriend (for the first time), it seems that she's gotten a lot better at it. Tori decides to trust her.

Thursday is two days before the May full moon, and she and Jade aren't planning to meet up that evening, since Jade has a final project she needs to turn in the next day; her classes are about to end, then she has a study week before her finals. Tori doesn't get a study week, and she still has a lot to do on top of preparing for the planned Saturday excursion to Shadow Creek Park, but she decides talking to Cat is important. Especially before summer starts and they all start spending a *lot* more time together.

Cat honestly seems a little relieved to get out of her apartment, and claims she needs a break from studying. She and Tori go to the Venice Beach boardwalk to get ice cream, and walk along the beach with their cones.

"You know, when you asked to hang out, it sounded like it might be important," Cat observes. "I mean, ice cream is pretty important, too," she amends.

"It's important," Tori confirms. She sighs. "I have a crush on someone who isn't Jade."

"*Ooh*," Cat trills. "That's exciting! Is it someone from your school?"

"Yes," Tori confirms, even though this isn't the most salient detail. She steels herself to stop beating around the bush. "It's Carly."

"*Ooooh*." Cat's intonation is much more drawn out this time. "Oh, wow," she murmurs. "I mean, I understand it, *of course*," she reassures Tori.

"I thought you might," Tori says wryly.

“What does Jade think about it?”

“She doesn’t know,” Tori admits. “And I need to keep it that way.” She eyes Cat to make the severity of her request clear.

“I won’t tell her,” Cat says immediately. “But for this to work, you’re going to have to tell her eventually.”

Tori frowns. “What do you mean?”

“I mean,” Cat hedges, “I can’t say for certain that it’ll happen. We don’t even know how Carly feels about you, and we’ve never talked about opening up our relationship further, but I can talk to Sam, and I think I would be okay with it. But you’d have to get Jade’s okay to—”

Tori finally begins to realize what Cat is talking about. “Oh, my god. Cat, no! I’m not trying to *date* Carly!”

“Oh.” Cat is quiet for a moment, contemplatively licking her strawberry ice cream. “Then why did you *tell* me?”

“Because...” Tori sighs. “I needed to tell *someone*. Jade doesn’t want to know. And it felt like the more I tried to keep it in, the more obsessive I felt about it. I mean, I already feel a little better telling you. And besides. I figured you could relate.”

“Oh, definitely,” Cat nods. “Carly’s so smart and funny. And *sexy*.”

“Right,” Tori mumbles, feeling warm.

“So then,” Cat says slowly. “What now?”

“I don’t really know.” Tori considers this. “I guess I just hoped not keeping it locked away would help my crush, like...pass.”

“Hmm,” Cat says thoughtfully. “I don’t really know how that works. I don’t really remember why I stopped liking Daniel.” Tori winces. The thought of *that* whole fiasco still makes her feel ashamed. “And I only stopped having a crush on Robbie when he kissed me. It was weird. I still don’t understand it. And then Carly...I guess it never really went away. Except it sort of did when it felt like we were fighting over Sam. But not really.”

“Yeah, I don’t think any of that is really applicable to my situation,” Tori says wryly.

“Sorry,” Cat offers. “I wish I’d gotten over more crushes so I could help you.”

And then Tori realizes: she should’ve told *Andre* about this. Andre, who purged his crush on Jade with a song. Andre, who probably crushed on Carly for a while there, too.

But Andre has been scarce lately. Probably dealing with the same end of semester pressures as everyone else. Though Tori is still certain he’d drop everything if she really needed him—that’s exactly the kind of friend he is—she already knows what to do.

She impulsively hugs Cat with the arm not holding her ice cream cone. “Thanks, Cat.”

“Glad I could help!” Cat chirps.

“And remember. No one finds out about this.”

“Trust me.” Cat mimes zipping her lips, then giggles.

Yeah, Tori doesn’t exactly feel *super* confident about this. But she’s at least pretty sure that Sam and Carly can keep a secret. Even if she really, *really* doesn’t want them to know, it’s Jade she wants to keep this from. At Jade’s own explicit request.

So Tori goes home and writes a song.

She’s out of practice. And she knows she’s always been a better collaborator (usually with Andre) than a solo songwriter. But she’s at least confident she can write lyrics.

She writes about the funny paths love takes to get to the heart (even though she’s *certainly* not in love with Carly). She writes about beautiful smiles, and kissable lips, and late night fantasies, and longing for someone. And the more she writes, the more it feels like she’s writing a little bit about Jade, too.

Her crush on Carly isn’t a red flag. It isn’t a sign that her relationship with Jade is lacking anything. And the more she writes, the more she realizes...this crush highlights, for her, how much Jade is a better match for her. Carly might be beautiful (she *is*), she might be talented (obviously), she might be somebody Tori admired from afar on her little computer screen for *years* (in retrospect...oh), she might be someone Tori would *really* enjoy kissing, and sleeping with (*no comment*).

But she’s not *Jade*. She doesn’t *challenge* Tori like Jade does. She doesn’t make Tori see the world in new ways like Jade does. She doesn’t make Tori feel like the luckiest idiot in the world when those blue eyes smile at her like Jade does.

Carly is her friend, her packmate. Tori thinks they’ll always be a part of each other’s lives. And she knows she can trust Carly with her sorrows, with her pain, with her secrets, and be trusted in return. Their intimacy is in friendship, in the almost familial bond that they feel when they’re wolves together.

She’s not supposed to be Tori’s lover. And Tori gets that.

Writing the song is the first step to getting over Carly, but it’s the most important. She records a short, rough cut of the song and posts it on her Spectrogram, and it feels like setting her feelings free, in a way. She understands even more why Andre performed that song for Jade, years ago.

Coupled with being able to spend more time with Jade the next week, whose evenings tend to be free after studying for finals all day, and Tori’s crush begins to fade away. Especially since Jade seems pleased with the song, seems to believe that it’s for her. Well, it both is and it



isn't. And if she smiles in Jade's arms, and lets herself be loved, it feels more and more like it really is.

And most importantly: she knows her crush didn't break her and Jade.

## May 2015

They're supposed to re-sign the lease for the apartment they're subletting to Rita Rooney in the middle of the month, just after finals week is over. It's poor timing, because of everything with school. Sam can hardly find time to have a conversation with either of her girlfriends, much less the three of them all together. And even she is putting in the work on final projects, allowing herself to attempt a bit of a hustle.

They'd previously discussed perhaps officially passing on the lease to Rita Rooney. Sam kind of assumes that's going to be the plan. But when they finally have a chance to talk about it, Carly isn't on board.

"I was thinking," Carly begins uncertainly, "That maybe you shouldn't give up that apartment quite yet."

"What do you mean?" Sam asks.

"Well," Carly says slowly, then sighs, and looks between Sam and Cat. "It's not that I don't like living with you," she hedges.

Cat gasps, clearly afraid of what's about to come next. Sam frowns. "Just say it," she tells Carly.

"I was thinking I should move back into my own studio apartment," Carly reveals.

"But *why*?" Cat asks. She's clearly upset. Sam reaches for her hand.

"I'm not trying to do this to *punish* anybody," Carly insists. "I just think that it's the best move. This apartment really isn't big enough. And while you two have learned how to live with each other, I still feel like I'm trying to fit in."

"You fit in *so well*," Cat insists.

"In some ways, I do. But we can have those things without me living with you. I'm not planning on moving back to Westwood. There's a studio apartment in this complex that's definitely in the right price range."

Cat looks over at Sam. She seems relieved. "Oh! So you won't be so far away!"

"Exactly," Carly smiles. "So we can still all see each other every day. Cat, you and I can still cook together. We can still do things like walk on the beach, and hang out watching TV. It's just that I'll have a place to go when I need to work in quiet, or be by myself for a little bit. And you guys will have your old place back! It suits you so well."

Sam glances at Cat. “That sounds...reasonable,” she admits.

Cat nods slowly. “It does sound reasonable,” she agrees reluctantly. “But I can’t help but feel like we’re taking a step backward in our relationship.”

But Sam thinks she gets it. “It’s not a backwards step if it helps us *stay* in a relationship,” she tells Cat.

Carly nods. “I know we never had such a knock-down, drag-out fight this year that I worried we might *actually* break up, but you have to admit, it was hard at times. And I expect it’s only going to get harder these next couple years of school. Cat, you’ll have a longer commute with me. And Sam...you’ll be doing something else.” Sam squirms uncomfortably, because she *still* doesn’t know what she’s going to do to occupy herself once she’s not attending community college with Cat anymore. “And I don’t know how that’s all going to mesh with us trying to share that apartment that feels weirdly too small.” She smiles at Cat. “This isn’t *forever*. When we’re in a position when we can afford a bigger place all together, I want that. But right now, we can afford for me to live nearby, and for us all to keep our sanity, and I think we should do it.”

“Besides,” Sam adds, “Following ‘steps’ in relationships is bullshit. And we’re already doing it ‘wrong’ by being a triad anyway. So who cares?”

Cat laughs. “Okay, you’re right.” She looks a little wistful. “I guess in an ideal world for me, we’d be in that bigger apartment already.”

“I know you’re going to miss having me around to help clean up after Sam,” Carly teases.

“Hey,” Sam frowns. She does her share of housework. She thinks.

At least this lease isn’t up until August, so they can let Rita Rooney know she has a few months to find a new place before they move back into their old apartment. Rita takes the news well. She admits she’s been seeing someone and they’d been talking about moving in together, so she takes this as a sign to go for it. The apartment will be theirs again in August.

It’s weird to think about going back. But Sam thinks it’s also going to feel like going *home*. In a way that living in this other apartment never quite managed. Carly is right. It felt too small. They’d done their best to make the rooms they’d had serve what they needed, but ultimately, they’d ended up with two bedrooms and a living room that didn’t actually offer any of them much privacy at all. Sam may not be the most private person in the world, but even she needs a space to go to that feels like her own.

As the semester wraps up, everyone has their eye toward summer. Sam expects a call from Freddie any day, announcing he’s coming down to Los Angeles for the summer and that they need to do their best to find places for him to stay.

But he doesn’t call.

Eventually, finally, Sam gets sick of it and sends him a text.

**You coming down this summer?**

It takes him a long time to reply. Too long, in Sam's opinion.

**Yeah, I'll be down maybe later this month**

**I'm spending some time at Stanford this summer too**

Sam had anticipated from the beginning that Freddie would eventually just want to stay at Stanford with some nerd buddies rather than coming down to bother them about *iCarly*. Not that it's a bother. Sam has actually kind of been looking forward to it.

Annoyed, she replies:

**What, did you finally join the nerd frat?**

**No**

He doesn't say anything else. Sam rolls her eyes. "Freddie's gonna be spending more time in NorCal this summer," she tells Carly and Cat.

"Oh!" Carly seems surprised. "Why?"

"I don't know. Maybe he finally made some nerd friends." As usual, Freddie's being annoyingly obtuse and not even offering a real explanation.

"Aww," Cat croons. "You miss him, don't you?"

"No," Sam rolls her eyes. Her phone starts buzzing in her hand. She recoils a bit in surprise. Her sister is calling her. She looks at her girlfriends with curious apprehension as she answers, "Hey, Melanie. What's up?" She sees the way Carly smiles and Cat's eyebrows rise in surprise.

"Hi, Sam," her sister replies. "How are you?"

"Fine..." Sam drawls, clearly expressing her skepticism that Melanie called her to chat.

Melanie gets the picture. “So, I’m calling for a reason.”

“Oh, geez. What did Mom do this time?”

“Oh, it has nothing to do with her. I’ve barely heard anything from her since I transferred to Stanford.”

“You transf—wait. That’s where—” How weird a coincidence is *that*?

“What?”

“Never mind. It’s not important. Then what do you want?”

“Well,” Melanie says hesitantly. “Look, I know we’ve never really talked about anything like this before. We don’t really have that kind of relationship. But I wanted you to know that I’m seeing someone.”

“Good for you?” Sam says. She still doesn’t understand the point of this call. “I’m seeing two women, so, there’s that,” she adds, because she feels like if Melanie is going to offer her random personal information, she could at least reciprocate.

“Right, I know,” Melanie replies.

“How do you know that?”

“Because I’ve been seeing your friend Freddie.”

“*What?!?*”

“It’s pretty casual, honestly,” Melanie explains, “But he felt weird hiding it from you and he asked me to tell you. I think he assumes that because we’re twins that we’re closer than we are.”

“*What the fuck?!?*”

“...Is that an actual question?” Melanie queries.

“*Why* would you want to date *Freddie*?”

“Because he’s cute? And sweet? You know I’ve always liked him.”

“I don’t even know what to say to that,” Sam answers. Her shock is subsiding, being replaced by anger. “I’m going to kill him.”

“For *what*?” Melanie asks, bewildered.

“For *this*, obviously!”

“Sam,” Melanie sighs. “Just because we’re twins doesn’t mean this is *about* you.”

“Don’t be *disgusting*, I’m not that conceited,” Sam snarls. “No, I’m going to kill him for being such a fucking *coward* that he made *you* call and handle this.”

“I don’t mind,” Melanie insists. “It *is* nice to hear from you every once in a while.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Sam grunts. “Next time, try not to call with news that turns my stomach.”

“How’s Carly?”

“She’s right here, want to talk to her?” God knows why Carly and Melanie ever developed a friendship, but Sam passes on her phone to Carly.

“Hey, Melanie!” Carly chirps happily. “I’m pretty sure I just overheard that you have big news!”

“Are you okay?” Cat asks Sam.

“Yeah, I’m fine.” Sam picks up Carly’s phone. She knows her passcode, has known it since Carly got her first PearPhone at fourteen. She texts Freddie.

**I’m going to kill you**

The response this time is quicker.

**Hi, Sam**

**Are you with my sister right now??**

**I just can tell it’s you**

She notices that he dodges the question. She waves at Carly. “Give me the phone.”

Carly frowns, “Hang on, Melanie, Sam wants something.”

Sam takes the phone back. “Put Freddie on.”

“What makes you think he’s even here?”

“Put him on!”

Melanie sighs, and the line is quiet for a moment. Then a moment later, Freddie says, “What do you want?”

“What is wrong with you?”

“I thought you’d rather hear it from her.”

“Uh-uh. No. You don’t get to do that.”

“Do what?”

“Pretend we’re not as close as we are so you can hide behind my sister!” Sam can see Cat and Carly exchanging looks. She doesn’t even know *why* she’s so upset about this. “How long has this been going on?”

Freddie pauses, like he’s considering how to answer. “A few months,” he admits. “But like Melanie said, it’s still casual, we’re just seeing where things go. That’s why I never told you. I didn’t want to make a big deal out of something that might not even go anywhere.”

“You thought dating my sister wouldn’t be *a big deal*?” Sam replies hotly. “Do you even *know* how lucky you are that she even *looked* at you?”

“Hey,” he mutters, actually sounding a little hurt.

“That’s not a slight on you,” Sam amends, tone still sharp. “Melanie doesn’t *date around*.”

“How do you know?” Freddie challenges. “You’re not even close.”

“I know my sister. And I know how driven she is. She wouldn’t waste a few months of her time with someone if she didn’t think there was real potential there.”

Freddie is quiet for a long moment. “What are you saying?” he asks.

“I’m *saying* that if you’re too much of a coward to be upfront about this, then you have a long way to go before you deserve her. And you’d *better* not fuck this up.”

“Okay, can I say something?” she hears Melanie say in the background, then her sister is back on the phone. “Sam. I appreciate what you’re trying to do, but I don’t need you to do this. I can make my own choices.”

“I’m not doing this for you. I’m doing this because Freddie is a fucking idiot!”

“I can *date* a fucking idiot if I want to!” Melanie fires back. Sam doesn’t think she’s ever heard Melanie swear before. She suppresses laughter.

“Hey!” she hears Freddie say in the background.

“Look.” Sam lowers her voice. “*Never* tell him I said this, but Freddie’s a good guy. I don’t want *either* of you to get hurt.”

“No offense,” Melanie says brightly. “But it’s not really your concern if either of us do. I’ll still be your sister and Freddie will still be one of your best friends.”

She has a point. Much as Sam hates to admit it. Something else occurs to Sam in the moment, as she remembers telling Cat she’s a werewolf before they ever started dating. “Did you tell him?” she asks Melanie abruptly. “Does he...know?”

It almost seems like Melanie has to think about what Sam means, but she answers after a moment. “No. You haven’t, right?”

“No. Why would I?”

“Hmm,” is all that she says. Probably because he’s *right there*.

“Want to talk to Carly some more?” she asks, ready to shut down the whole conversation.

“I do!” Melanie says eagerly.

Sam passes her phone over. Carly gives her a sympathetic smile and shakes her head wonderingly before she starts talking to Melanie as if they’d never been interrupted.

Cat pats her arm placatingly. “I think it’s sweet what you did.”

“Yelled at them both until they got annoyed with me?” Sam scoffs.

“No. I just think it’s sweet how you worry about the people you care about.”

For once, Sam can’t fight her on this. Cat is right. She cares about her friends, and damn it, she cares about her sister, too. Even if they never see eye to eye on a single thing.

## June 2015

Freddie comes down to LA at the end of May and stays into June, but this time, he doesn’t bring Robbie with him. That’s expected, though. Beck knows that Robbie is staying at Stanford to take summer classes, trying to get caught up so he can graduate in three years instead of four. Beck is proud of him for that, even if it sucks to miss him so much. Beck had offered to come up to visit during the week between the end of the spring semester and the start of the summer semester, but Robbie claimed to be busy moving into one of the dorms that’s open during the summer and with comedy. Which, sure. Great. Beck is proud of him. He’d *love* to see Robbie do comedy again. Or he doesn’t even have to go, he could just literally be happy waiting for him in whatever dorm he’s currently living in (which, come on, it can’t take more than a day to move dorms, right?).

But, it’s cool to see Freddie, and it’s been fun since his friends are out of school. He wrapped shooting his show a couple of months ago at this point, and they’ll pick up filming toward the end of July, so he has much more free time now. His workload right now is much more sporadic; a couple of guest roles on shows that have him on set for a week, tops, one tiny role in a horror movie in which he plays a stoner that gets killed that has him on set for a single

day. But mostly, he's taking it easy until shooting resumes for season 2. The show is a hit and he's along for the ride. Maybe he'll even be credited as a series regular next season. He's starting to get recognized more when he goes out, though. So often he prefers just partying in his trailer, or at a friend's house.

As Freddie begins to wrap up his visit, though, Beck has an idea. He calls Robbie to pitch it.

"Hi, Beck," Robbie greets warmly.

"Hey, Rob," Beck answers. "How's the semester going?"

Robbie huffs out something that sounds like "*Woof*," then adds, "It's been pretty crazy. They're keeping me awfully busy up here."

"I bet," Beck offers sympathetically. "But, hey, I had a thought. I don't really have anything on my plate until July, except some meetings I can do over the phone. Why don't I come back to Stanford with Freddie and spend the next couple of weeks with you?"

"Oh," Robbie answers, sounding disappointed. "Oh, yeah, I'm not sure that would work for me. This is a stressful semester."

"I don't even have to go with Freddie," Beck adds. He'd only suggested it because the idea of traveling with Freddie would mean a guaranteed several weeks. "I can just come up with my trailer. Or even without it. Maybe even for this weekend. What do you say?"

"Oh...I don't know," Robbie hedges. "I'm really sorry. I just don't know if it's a good idea."

Beck doesn't even know what to say. He just can't understand why his boyfriend doesn't want to see him. So he calls him on it. "Why do I get the feeling like you don't even want to see me?"

"That's not true," Robbie scoffs, but it's weak.

"No, it is. I've offered multiple times to come see you. No pressure. I'm not even asking you to *do* anything but maybe spend a little time with me. We don't have to go anywhere. We don't have to see anyone or talk to anyone. I just want to *see* you and you just apparently don't have time for me."

"I've told you how busy I am," Robbie says quietly. "And you're *so* busy when you're filming."

"I know. That's why I'm trying to make the most of the time I'm *not* filming," Beck says evenly. "Because come July, I just don't even know if we're going to go weeks without even talking on the phone regularly again."

"I'm sorry," Robbie says. "It's just so hard when we both don't have time."

Beck has been feeling frustrated and set aside for months now. He knows school is important, but *god damn it*, Robbie. He decides the nuclear option is all he has left. "Maybe if we don't have time for each other, we should just accept that."



“Accept what?”

“That we’re not actually dating each other anymore.”

He expects Robbie to deny this, to fight him on it, to give him *some* indication that he still wants to be with him with all his heart. Instead, he gets a resigned, “Maybe that’s for the best.”

And then nothing else. “Are you serious right now?” Beck asks.

“Well, you sounded pretty serious, so...”

“That’s it? You want to break up?”

“God, Beck, I don’t *want* to. But...maybe you’re right. Maybe we aren’t right for each other right now.”

“I can’t believe I’m hearing this.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I’m...” Beck just shakes his head. The last thing he’d expected in making this phone call was to find out he didn’t have a boyfriend anymore. “I have to go.”

“Okay,” Robbie says quietly.

“Goodbye, Robbie.” Just saying it feels like it makes everything official.

He hears Robbie’s voice break as he manages, “Bye.”

Beck sits on his bed and stares at nothing in his trailer for a long moment. He doesn’t know what to do with his emotions. He’s never really known how to handle them. It’s why he got into acting. Because he’s always felt he has a lot to express, but hasn’t known how to do it in a healthy way, until he discovered becoming someone else.

He remembers how Jade would always want him to show her how he felt, to express how much he cared about her. And he never quite knew how. With Robbie, it came easier. And even these attempts to visit have been expressions of love between them.

But he’s just been rebuffed. He’s just been dumped. And it hurts way more than any time he and Jade broke up.

He flops onto his back and stares at the ceiling now, imagining all kinds of scenarios for how he can express the pain he’s currently experiencing, behind his stoic exterior.

If nothing else, this is going to be great fodder for acting. He scoffs at his own assessment.

He’d rather have Robbie than a leg up in his career.

News of the breakup spreads fast. Probably because Robbie posts a link of the song “All By Myself” onto Splashface. Though, it’s the Babes in Toyland version, so at first it’s hard to tell if it’s a serious sentiment. Maybe the rawness appeals to him. Or maybe there’s no way Robbie’s taste is this good and he just didn’t listen to it. Jade doesn’t know which way to go with it.

But, if it’s true, then she should probably check in on Beck. You know. Since they’re best friends or whatever.

She figures if she just texts him, then he’ll probably ignore her, so she gives him a call.

“Hey,” he answers tonelessly.

“Hey,” she replies. When he doesn’t say anything else, she asks, “You okay?”

More silence. Then, “I guess so.”

“Yeah, that’s a no,” Jade drawls. “Hey, it’s okay to be upset. This sucks.”

“Yeah.”

And nothing else from Beck. Jesus, she knows he’s repressed, but this is ridiculous. “Do you want to talk about it? Maybe tell me what happened?” It’s not just because she’s nosy, she also thinks it would genuinely do him good.

He sighs. “It just got to the point where the distance was too much,” he says succinctly. “Like, why even pretend we’re dating anymore if I never see him, barely talk to him, and we’re living entirely separate lives?”

For the first time, Jade hears some heat in his tone. That’s a good thing, she thinks. But it’s also evidence of just how upset he is. Maybe she can offer him some comfort. “Yeah, I hear you. Tori and I kinda went through that earlier this year.” Thank *god* it’s summer, because they’ve finally gotten back to a point where they both feel fully secure again.

“Yeah?” he asks incuriously.

“Yeah.” Jade pushes on, wanting to give him some hope. “But we didn’t break up. We got through it. And we found ways to keep connected. Maybe this is just a bump in the road. Hell, if Robbie has any sense, he’s going to call you back within a week.” It didn’t even take *her* that long to come to her senses, and Robbie’s the one dating *well* above his league.

“Maybe,” Beck says indifferently. “But there’s a difference between you and Tori and me and Robbie. You two live in the same damn city. Maybe it doesn’t always feel like it. But you two *actually* get to see each other. I haven’t seen Robbie since March.”

*Ouch.* “Yeah. That fucking sucks.”

“Tell me about it. And you know what else is different? Tori *actually* wants to be with you.”

This stuns Jade. “Robbie broke up with *you*?”

“No. I don’t know. I guess it was mutual. But he sure as hell didn’t ask me to stay.”

Wow. Jade feels like the world is completely upside down. “So...what are you going to do?”

“I don’t even know.” He’s quiet for a long moment. “Maybe I should do something I never got to do.”

Okay, this could be progress. Beck is looking forward to something. “What?”

“Have a slut phase.” But then he scoffs. “The best I can without upsetting my management team, anyway.”

Yeah, okay, the idea of Beck Oliver going on the prowl tonight in West Hollywood is nothing but trouble. Jade would support him at any other moment than this. But for now, she makes it her goal to at least make sure he stays put tonight. He can make decisions about which anonymous dicks he wants to suck with a clearer head. “I’m getting a pizza and bringing over a movie,” she decides.

“I’m *fine*, you don’t have t—”

“Shut up. We’re hanging out.”

And, just like he always did when they were dating, Beck acquiesces. “Okay.” A moment later. “That’d be nice, actually.”

“Yeah, that’s me, the queen of nice.”

He snorts at that. Jade takes it as a victory.

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Robbie is devastated.

He’d thought that anticipating this for months would make it hurt less, but it really doesn’t seem to have helped. He may have expected this. He may have even let it happen, in a passive sort of way. Robbie isn’t the type to rip off a bandaid. He had succumbed to the inevitable long ago, but having to say goodbye to Beck for the last time almost breaks him.

At first, he has no idea what to do. He can’t even concentrate on school in this state. But luckily, after he posts the breakup song on his Splashface, it doesn’t take Cat long to call him.

“Robbie, I’m so sorry,” is the first thing she says.

Just that is enough to revert him back to a blubbering mess for a moment. Finally, he manages, “Thank you.”

“Do you want to talk about it or do you want me to distract you?” Cat offers.

“I can talk about it. I think.” He tells her about how he’d always known that Beck is better than he is. How Beck is meant for greater things, greater people. Cat tries to refute this, to tell

Robbie that he *is* greater people, but Robbie knows Cat doesn't get it. "Beck is probably the kindest, most beautiful man I'm ever going to be with," Robbie sighs.

"Robbie," Cat says, sounding frustrated. "I hate to hear you talk this way!"

"I'm just being honest about how I feel."

"I don't think it's good for you," Cat states firmly. "Do you want to talk about something else? I can tell you about a funny thing I did the other day."

Letting Cat distract him sounds nice, honestly. But in the background of Cat's phone call, he hears laughter. Sam and Carly.

"Keep it down!" he hears Cat hiss at them, though she makes an effort to cover the mouthpiece. Robbie still hears it, though.

"You know what, I'm feeling better just talking about this," Robbie lies. "Thank you for calling."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure."

"Okay," Cat says reluctantly. "I wish I lived closer. I'd make you a cake and bring over Candyland for us to play."

"A cake?" Robbie questions. "What, like a Happy Breakup cake?"

"No!" A pause. "Actually, yes. Wouldn't that be a great thing to have for a breakup? A good cake and a song?"

"I think that would solve all my problems," Robbie replies with feigned sincerity.

No, he can't talk to Cat more about this. As lovely and caring and compassionate as she is and has always been to him, he can't read her sympathy as anything but pity. Cat has exactly who she wants to be with. *Two* people. She's never even *been* through a breakup like this. And his own confusing history with her doesn't help.

But Freddie will be back in town in a few days. Maybe he can commiserate with single Freddie.

In fact, when Freddie does get back into town, he texts Robbie right away. And when he shows up at Robbie's dorm room, he has a cake.

"Um," Freddie begins. "I'm supposed to sing to you."

Robbie is *deadly* curious, but Freddie seems awfully reluctant. "You don't have to," he assures him.

“No, I’ve got it.” Freddie clears his throat, and sings. “Happy breakup to you. Now you can focus on you. You’re special and worthy. And you’ll love again too!”

Robbie claps, mostly an automatic response, but he also appreciates the sentiment. “I take it you talked to Cat,” he states.

Freddie nods. “I don’t have Candyland, but I did bring Ticket to Ride?”

Maybe a distraction *is* what Robbie needs. “Okay, show me how to play.”

They eat cake and start playing the board game. But as stupid as it sounds, even the board game makes him think of Beck.

“Beck always said he’d love to play a role set in the age of steam,” Robbie sighs. “With the top hats, and the little moustaches and things.”

Freddie nods carefully. “I could see that being a good look for him,” he offers neutrally.

And later: “Vancouver is where Beck is from.”

“Not too far from Seattle.”

Then, “Beck always wanted to go to Las Vegas with me. And now I don’t even know if we could do it if we were still together, anyway, because he *has* to be getting recognized when he goes out now.”

“I think he is,” Freddie confirms. “He’s spending most of the summer at home.”

But Freddie’s information just solidifies what Robbie thought he already knew: Beck is becoming too famous for him.

It’s better that they did this now. Rip the bandaid off, so to speak.

Maybe *that’s* why Robbie is crying. He *hates* ripping band-aids off.

Freddie doesn’t seem to know what to do. “Oh, hey,” he mutters, but long moments later, he scooches over to Robbie’s side of the game board, and puts a tentative arm around Robbie’s shoulders.

Robbie buries his face in the meat of Freddie’s shoulder. It seems to startle Freddie for a moment, and he flinches, but he doesn’t move, just holds Robbie, and even pats his back with his other hand.

“Sorry if I…said something I shouldn’t have,” Freddie finally offers.

“No,” Robbie tells him. He wipes at his face, but keeps his head resting on Freddie’s shoulder. “It’s just still…really fresh.”

“I’ll bet,” Freddie says. His voice lacks all the obvious sympathy of Cat’s voice, but it feels more real somehow. Freddie is measured, but genuine.

“I couldn’t talk to Cat about all of it,” Robbie says. “I didn’t feel like she’d understand. But maybe you would, since you’re single.”

Freddie shifts, slightly. “I’m not—I guess that’s true, I’m not seeing anyone *seriously*,” he says.

There’s something weighty in his tone, but Robbie thinks he gets it. This is the kind of thing single guys say when they’re trying to make it sound like they get more play than they actually do. So he just continues. “I just can’t see how I’m ever going to meet someone like him again,” he laments. “And then, girls never like me, so that feels hopeless, too.”

Freddie chuckles, “Why would it matter if girls like you?”

“Because I sometimes like them?”

Freddie puts enough distance between them to try to catch Robbie’s eye. Robbie is reluctant to lift his head from Freddie’s shoulder, because the contact feels *good*. It’s been months since anyone has held him. “Wait. I didn’t know you were bi.”

“I can understand that. You only really got to know me after I started dating Beck.” *And I had such a huge crush on you when we met.* “I guess I’m bi. I always kind of liked pansexual better, though. I know there really isn’t a big difference, but it feels more like me, somehow.”

“I just didn’t know,” Freddie says quietly. “Do...girls not like you because they think you’re gay?” he wonders.

Robbie chuckles darkly. “No. They just never have,” he says succinctly. “Except Cat, sort of, at one time. But that’s way, way in the past.”

“I see.” He seems stuck on this somehow. “But wouldn’t it make it harder to be with women? Don’t they see you as...not a man?”

“Most people don’t tend to see me as much of a man, anyway,” Robbie shrugs. Sometimes, he’s not entirely sure he’s a man, either, but he knows that’s not exactly what Freddie is asking about. Of course, he’s seen some things out there, about men who stay in the closet for this very reason, but he’s not really someone who has ever been easily able to hide. As Freddie proves, he has to come out about liking *girls*. “I wouldn’t want to be with someone who judges me for who I am, anyway.”

“That’s a good point,” Freddie says slowly.

“I’m used to people not liking me even without the sexuality stuff,” Robbie explains. “I know I’m weird. I’m just not good with most people.”

“I think you do fine,” Freddie reassures him. “Sometimes perfectly good people just strike out.”

Robbie assumes he’s talking about himself. “Yeah,” he replies. He rests his head back on Freddie’s shoulder. They sit quietly, leaning against Robbie’s bed, Freddie just offering a gentle sort of comfort. “Freddie?” he asks.

“Yeah?”

“When I’m...ready to get back out there, will you be my wingman?”

Freddie laughs. “I think I’m about as well-equipped for this sort of thing as you are, but... yeah. Of course.”

Robbie wants to tell Freddie he’s at least swoonworthy, that people are drawn to his fine features and his nice arms. But he’s afraid if he says anything that could be interpreted as flirtatious, that Freddie will stop holding him. And he really doesn’t want Freddie to stop holding him.

Robbie knows you have to be careful with straight guys. They’re easily scared. Not all of them are like Andre.

He allows himself to be held, just a little longer, closing his eyes and thinking about Beck’s arms around him, his lips, his laughing dark eyes.

*And you’ll love again too*, Freddie had sang.

To Robbie, it feels like he’ll never stop.

# The Center

September 2015

Despite all of Sam's insistence that she doesn't really care about school, and isn't really taking college seriously at all, she finds she misses it when she's no longer attending. Maybe it's just the routine that's a form of helpful structure for her. Maybe it's the fact that it used to be a guaranteed part of spending time with Cat. Maybe it's because being home alone all day...is actually kinda boring. Even the shine of being back at her old apartment, with its dining nook and its giant master bedroom with a secret safe and its weird second bathroom with the shower no one likes, can only keep her satisfied for so long.

It's not like she has a strong desire to go back to college. The chances of her regularly attending a class without Cat's need to go on campus to motivate her is extremely low, and she's not about to waste money paying for something like that. It's more just that she misses having something to *do*.

But now, Cat has transferred to UCLA to take classes alongside Tori and Carly, though, to hear Carly tell it, they'll all have fewer opportunities to take classes together than in previous semesters, because the upper level classes get more specialized. That kind of sucks. But Cat and Carly have a commute together now. It's a longer commute, too, and their schedules don't line up exactly, so they're gone for most of the day, studying on campus while they wait for one another to get out of class.

If it were anyone else, Sam might feel replaced. But she loves both of them, she knows how nice it is to have routines with someone you love, especially when that someone (namely Carly) doesn't technically live with you.

Amusingly, though, just like last time she and Cat lived in this apartment together, at first Carly was here *all the time*. It's almost as though it's just the *idea* of a space of her own that she needs more than the space itself. Sam had wondered if it was just that particular apartment that wasn't right for them, or if a different layout might have worked a little better, but when school started back up again, Carly began spending more time in her studio apartment. That's when it made sense. But meals, leisure time, sex, and just wanting company keeps Carly present a lot.

It also makes it easier to have one on one time with a partner. She or Cat can go over to Carly's if they want to spend time with just each other, or Sam and Cat have more time to themselves, while they share their apartment. Sam has to admit, Carly was right. Right now, this arrangement works better than trying to live all together.

Though, maybe that's also because Sam isn't trying to *do* anything. She's just...*there*. Watching TV, eating, going out to her hitting tree when she can't find anything else to do with herself. She can't count how many times she's said she doesn't like "doing stuff," but maybe it's doing stuff *alone* that she doesn't enjoy.

Luckily...there's Dice.



He gets out of high school before Cat and Carly generally get back from UCLA. Sam probably wouldn't have thought much about him if he hadn't dropped by one day, trying to sell mislabeled spices.

"It's a surprise in every sprinkle!" he claims. "You never know what flavor is going to enhance your dish!"

Sam snorts. "No one's going to buy that."

"You'd be surprised," Dice draws. "I'm pretty good at this, you know."

"Maybe so, but you're going about this one all wrong." Sam takes one of the spice canisters. "These...these are *prank* spices."

"*Prank* spices?"

"Sure," Sam replies. "Just find some PTA mom who's annoyed that some other lady's baked goods are always the favorite. Or give it to your grandma if you want to ruin Christmas. There's *tons* of potential when people confuse garlic powder for ginger, or cayenne for cinnamon." She considers this. "Though, actually, one time Cat accidentally made French toast with cayenne and it was *delicious*."

"Ew," Dice wrinkles his nose. "I don't know if pitching these as a prank would work, anyway. People can smell the difference pretty easily."

"Not if they're not paying attention," Sam says, thinking again of Cat. Sam had smelled the difference as soon as she woke up, but Cat hadn't noticed until they were cooked and plated. And Cat has a *good* palate, for a human. It's probably because it was early and she was cooking on autopilot.

"Well, how about this," Dice offers, a glint in his eye. "Why don't you and I have a contest?"

Sam groans. "I'm not going to sell your stuff for you. If you want to make money, do it yourself."

Dice presses a hand to his chest. "I'm hurt that you think I'd have you work for me and not pay you."

Sam stands up. It's not as effective anymore now that Dice is a sophomore in high school and he's several inches taller than Sam, even discounting his poofy hair. "I'm not going to work *for* you," she tells him firmly. "I'll work *with* you. Anything I sell, I keep the money."

Dice narrows his eyes. "Fine. Minus overhead and initial product cost."

"What *overhead*?"

"It takes time to acquire and substantiate the authenticity of my products, you know," Dice replies loftily. "And I'm a high school student. Do you know that each class I'm taking tries to assign me a half hour of homework a night?"

“Homework’s a waste of time,” Sam grumbles.

“I don’t disagree, but I need to pass high school,” Dice replies. “Most of what I learn isn’t going to help me start my own business, but nobody invests in a quitter.”

Sam sighs and rolls her eyes. But, fuck it, she has nothing else to do. “Fine. I’ll work *with* you.”

Dice just about dances with excitement. “I’ve never had an employee before!”

“*Not* an employee. A *partner*,” Sam insists. “I have experience running business ventures myself, you know.” Not that she’s about to elaborate on the time she basically ran a child labor sweatshop in the basement of Carly’s apartment building, but hey. Business, as she knows, is all about spin.

She’s actually glad Dice dropped by. The apartment they just moved out of had been much further away from his apartment, and they’d seen a lot less of him. It’s kind of nice to have a friendly neighbor again, rather than the grumpy old man whose dog never stopped barking at her, or the lady who Sam only ever saw wearing a bathrobe while she smoked on her porch who reminded her uncomfortably of her mom.

And, Sam reflects, not only does this give her something to do, but she’s actually going to make some money outside of babysitting. Their babysitting business had taken a hit when they moved apartments. It had been more difficult to look after kids in the smaller common room, and Carly had seemed extra bothered by children in her home. They would have been in trouble if not for Cat and Carly’s well-off parents.

But as Sam has always told herself, she’s not going to rely on money from people she’s sleeping with. She’s not her mother. She’s going to find her own way to contribute to her family. Especially if they ever want to be in a financial position to live together in the future. If she’s not in school, then she has to find some kind of work that doesn’t make her want to cry when she wakes up every morning.

Selling things with Dice may not be much right now. But it’s a start.

-

“But—wait. We just spent all summer together. I really thought we were building toward something!”

“We *are*. We’re just building toward something that I’m not ready for yet.”

Freddie is bewildered, and, okay, a little angry, but mostly, he’s *hurt*. Melanie looks hurt, too, and apologetic, but she’s firm in her conviction: she and Freddie aren’t going to be seeing each other right now, because she has to focus on school. He just can’t wrap his mind around it. He doesn’t understand what changed. They saw each other last semester. It was sporadic, and casual, but they made time for each other on occasion. Yeah, sure, the workload is going to get more difficult, but Freddie can’t imagine they’ll have *net zero* hours to spend together.

Melanie can clearly see his emotions on his face, because hers crumples a little. “I’m *sorry*,” she tells him genuinely. “I really am. I wish it could be different.”

“I guess I just don’t understand why it *can’t*,” Freddie tells her. His tone is a little harsh, and he attempts to soften it as he continues. “I’m not asking for anything more with you than what we’ve *been* doing. I haven’t asked for anything like that.” *I haven’t even asked for sex.* He’s thought about it. Of course. And it’s not like they’ve done *nothing* together, on that front. But Melanie’s insistence that this is “casual” felt to Freddie like code for “I’m not ready yet,” and he’d respected that.

“I know that,” Melanie tells him. “And believe me when I say that it’s not you. It’s me.”

Freddie rolls his eyes. “That’s *never* true,” he scoffs.

“I know how it sounds,” she says regretfully. “But I mean it. I know you haven’t asked for more. We kept this casual. Which I’ve asked for, and I’ve needed. But the problem is, for me...there’s only so long that I can date someone and it *stays* casual.”

Frowning, Freddie considers this. “So what are you saying?” he finally prompts. He doesn’t want to guess anymore. Sometimes it’s better if women just explain themselves.

“I’m saying...if we keep seeing each other, I’m going to want more than casual. And I’m not ready for that, for personal reasons.” There’s something significant in her gaze that tells Freddie he shouldn’t ask. Well, he knows enough about Sam’s childhood that not much would surprise him, as far as trauma goes. “And because I need to stay focused on school,” Melanie adds. “And I’m afraid if we get serious, I won’t be *able* to.”

“Are you really trying to tell me you can’t date me right now because you’re afraid you’ll like me too much?” Freddie asks.

Melanie tilts her head to the side. “Maybe I should have just put it that way. It’s kinder. And more truthful.”

“I guess it is,” Freddie replies. “I still don’t like it,” he adds, “But this is less confusing. I mean, it’s still a *little* confusing. But of course I’ll respect what you need.”

“I’m not saying I *never* want to see you this semester,” she hedges. “It just...can’t be romantic. And we can pick up where we left off during winter break. If you’re still single.”

Freddie scoffs, because, well, he’s pretty sure he will be. But he decides he needs a boundary of his own. “I don’t know if I can see you if we’re not together.”

Now *she* looks as crestfallen as he feels. “Of course,” she says quietly. “That only makes sense.”

“I think it would...get too confusing for me,” he tells her.

“Maybe it’s for the best,” she agrees regretfully.

“Well. Thanks for letting me know where we stand,” Freddie says awkwardly.

“I guess I’ll see you...this winter,” Melanie adds. She reaches for his hand, and they share a lingering, but chaste kiss, and then she smiles forlornly, and they part.

Freddie has had some weird breakups in his time. There was the time he’d broken up with Carly, who he’d genuinely believed was the love of his life, because he felt certain her love for him wasn’t based in anything genuine. He’d been correct, but it was still an act of bravery and maturity that he can scarcely believe he went through with at the time. He’d broken up with Sam after making out with her for hours in an elevator, then going their separate ways, with no intention of ever getting that close again. In retrospect, maybe Sam had been trying to prove something, maybe only to herself. For Freddie, the memory is surreal.

He supposes maybe this is an area where Sam and Melanie are similar. Both are capable of very practical, cerebral breakups; it isn’t working, so they should part. Emotions can be set aside in favor of circumstances. For Sam and Melanie, end goals seem to matter more than personal satisfaction.

Or, well, maybe that’s not entirely true of Sam, outside of that situation. Personal satisfaction matters *a lot* to her. Just ask any tub of fried chicken that makes its way to her vicinity. And, actually, maybe he’s flattering himself by assuming she got much personal satisfaction out of kissing him to begin with.

And Freddie guesses that...he can go along with stuff like this. He can understand an intellectual approach to dating. He can understand the intricacies of rejection that isn’t really rejection, just a delay. He wants to believe that he and Melanie are still working toward something together. They’ve just hit pause, and the rest of the world still moves around them.

But here he is, now. Functionally single. And *actually* single. By all definitions, except for the fact that he *wishes* he weren’t, and he *wishes* there was a certain person, who *also* wishes, who could be with him right now.

It’s a bit of a mindfuck, to be honest.

He finds himself wandering to Robbie’s dorm.

He and Robbie have gotten closer over the summer. He’d been there for him after his breakup with Beck, offering a shoulder to cry on and a listening ear. It felt like the right thing to do, and to be honest, Robbie didn’t really have anybody else on campus. Freddie had always felt that there was some tension between them, some uncertainty, but that has started to fade over the summer. He enjoys Robbie’s company and it turns out, they have a lot in common. Maybe not the comedy thing—though Robbie did invite Freddie to watch a few of his performances at local comedy clubs, and Freddie was unexpectedly impressed. He’s seen Rex a few times before but he still can’t quite figure out how Robbie does it. And without the puppet, Robbie is definitely developing some decent material.

And, as far as things they *do* have in common, Robbie is generally the best Ticket to Ride opponent that Freddie plays against. Along with most other board games. Despite the reputation of the school as “nerdy,” not everyone is a strategic thinker, evidently.

Usually, they'll text before they hang out, so when Robbie answers the door to his dorm room, he seems surprised. "Oh! Hey!" He ushers him inside. "What brings you here?"

Freddie just shakes his head to start. "Your roommate's back in town?" he asks. The other side of the dorm is messy with bags and boxes, like maybe he just arrived.

"Yeah, but I'm not expecting to see him until Sunday," Robbie says. "He's with his girlfriend." He shakes his head. "I really think he only has a dorm so his parents don't know how serious they are," he discloses in a gossipy sort of tone.

"Right," Freddie mutters.

Robbie seems to notice his general demeanor at this point. "Hey, you okay, fella?"

Freddie takes a deep breath. "I just got dumped."

"Oh, man," Robbie moans. "I'm so sorry." But then, his eyes narrow. "Wait. I didn't even know you were seeing anybody."

Freddie winces. Yeah, he knew this was coming. He'd kind of kept Melanie from Robbie. Mostly because Robbie's assumption that Freddie was single had been a comfort to him, back when he'd broken up with Beck. "Yeah, I was. It was never serious. That's why I didn't really talk about it."

"Oh," Robbie replies. He seems to accept this, but he seems like he's still trying to piece together information. "Is she in our program? Do I know her?"

Freddie's mouth thins. A normal person might realize that this is probably the *last* thing Freddie wants to talk about, but Robbie isn't a normal person. So Freddie just answers honestly. "No, she isn't. And I don't think you know her. She's Sam's sister."

"Sam like—*our* Sam?" Robbie asks, seeming startled. "I didn't even know she *had* a sister!"

"Well, she does," Freddie informs him. "That's another reason we kept things quiet for so long. Sam didn't know at first. She does now, but." He considers this. "Well, I guess maybe I should tell her that her sister and I aren't a thing anymore." He *really* doesn't want to have this conversation. Sam can call him a coward all she wants, but this sounds like a *nightmare*. He clears his throat. "So, yeah. We dated casually, I really like her. But she broke up with me because she needs to focus on school."

"Yeah, that makes a lot of sense," Robbie says wistfully.

Freddie twists his mouth sympathetically and sits on the edge of Robbie's bed. He remembers that this was part of the reason Robbie and Beck had broken up. Which...it's probably good he spent most of the summer up here in Stanford. After the time he'd gone back to Los Angeles in July, Robbie had peppered him with questions about how Beck was doing. And honestly...Beck had *looked* fine, aside from some dark circles under his eyes. But he'd been quieter than usual (which, he's *already* pretty quiet, so it was honestly creepy), his face

seemed harder than it used to, and he'd spent a lot of time on his phone swiping guys on apps. The last part he hadn't told Robbie about. It just seemed cruel.

Freddie sits quietly. He doesn't know exactly what he wants from Robbie right now. He's not crying, because a part of him feels like what's going on with Melanie isn't *really* over. Like, it is, right now, obviously. But there's a *chance* it isn't. So, really, he's just *bummed*. He doesn't need quite the same support he gave Robbie over the summer.

He just needs a friend. And Robbie is the best one he has here. He's not even sure when that happened.

But abruptly, Robbie slaps Freddie's thigh, hard enough that it makes him jump. "You know what we could do?" Robbie suggests.

"What?" Freddie asks warily.

"We should go to a party tonight!"

Freddie scrunches up his face in displeasure. "Eh, I don't know," he replies disinterestedly.

"Come on," Robbie wheedles. "You know, I still really haven't been to a college party here. And I know some people have beginning of the semester bashes. You could wingman for me! And if you're feeling it," Robbie nudges Freddie, "Maybe I could do the same for you!"

Freddie rubs his face, "I'm pretty sure I'm not ready to get back out there." But you know what? Fuck it. Going out and *doing something reckless* sounds better than wallowing around Robbie's dorm room all night. "But if you're ready, then I'll keep my promise. I'll wingman for you."

"Hot beef!" Robbie exclaims. It took Freddie some time, but he eventually realized most exclamations like this are just non sequitur expressions of excitement. "What do we wear?" he asks eagerly.

"Uh." Freddie glances down at his jeans and buttoned shirt. "I'm just gonna wear this. You can wear whatever you want."

"Should I get out my leather pants?" Robbie wonders.

Freddie considers how to say this nicely. "Maybe save that for a more special occasion," he suggests.

"You're right," Robbie agrees, to Freddie's relief.

The party is kind of a nightmare. Some of the essential elements of an enjoyable party are there: booze, weed, music. But it lacks anyone Freddie actually wants to talk to. None of his friends are here, other than Robbie. The music is almost too loud to hold a conversation. The alcohol is either clumsily mixed by a stranger or cheap beer; at least Beck can usually get his hands on something halfway decent.

But it is, clearly, full of people looking to hook up. So Freddie grabs a beer and does his best to find people who might be a good fit for Robbie.

Robbie offers him suggestions, and some people Freddie approaches on his own. But the end result is the same.

“Oh,” the petite brunette with glasses utters, face falling, when Freddie points out Robbie. “I thought *you* were hitting on me.”

“Oh, um. Sorry. No,” Freddie answers, processing too late that perhaps he could have gotten a phone number of his own. Not that he really wants one. Or, well. Maybe he does. Now that he’s in the hormone-soaked atmosphere, he wonders why he should bother holding back. He’s single. He can act like it.

“Sorry,” says a lanky redhead with an elegantly prominent nose. “I’m here with my boyfriend.” She gestures toward a guy who is *definitely* eyeing Freddie suspiciously.

“My mistake,” he mutters, and quickly disappears into the crowd.

“Oh, I’m actually straight, but that’s very flattering,” says a blond guy with shoulder length hair and a wide smile.

“Oh,” Freddie utters, slightly stunned. “Right.”

“No, thanks. I’m a lesbian,” says a disinterested girl with long dark hair and a deep brown complexion.

“Sorry to bother you,” Freddie replies, adding a “ma’am” simply because he’s intimidated.

“Hmm,” grunts an Asian guy with a sharp jawline and several piercings in one ear. “I don’t know. He’s kind of cute, I guess,” he drawls thoughtfully.

“He is,” Freddie agrees encouragingly.

The guy looks Freddie up and down. “Are you sure *you’re* not part of a package deal here?”

Freddie swallows thickly. “Uhh. Nope. No, I’m not looking for anybody tonight.”

By now, it’s kind of a lie, and maybe the guy hears that. “Shame,” he murmurs. “What’s he like?” he asks, nodding toward Robbie.

“Oh, he’s very smart,” Freddie informs him. “And he’s funny. He actually has this ventriloquism act that—”

“Pass.” And with that, the guy is gone.

“Wh—but—” Freddie sputters at no one. “But he’s *talented*,” he insists to the empty air.

“Him?” asks a skinny, well-dressed guy with unexpectedly shaggy hair. “Yeah, for sure!”

“Great!” Freddie says enthusiastically. Only to watch the guy...walk right past Robbie to a completely different man. Though, Freddie notices a bit later on that they’re still talking. Maybe he actually *is* responsible for a love connection tonight.

It’s not going well. In desperation, finally, Freddie approaches a round-faced girl with a ponytail whose skin is tanned like she spent all summer at the beach. “Hey, so, um. I’ve got this friend. He’s a really great guy, and he thinks you’re cute. Would you maybe want to go talk to him?”

“That’s...forward,” she replies, seeming slightly taken aback. “Who is he?” When Freddie points out Robbie, she smiles a little. “Okay,” she says thoughtfully. “I’ll go see what he’s all about.”

Freddie almost jumps in the air pumping his fist in victory, but he contains himself.

He watches as Robbie and the girl start talking. He can see that Robbie looks a little awkward, but, charmingly so. He hopes it’s working. But then, within a couple of minutes, the girl wanders off. Robbie looks a bit frustrated.

“What happened?” Freddie asks as he approaches his friend.

“Oh, I blew it,” Robbie says dejectedly. “She claimed she could hear her friend calling for her, but I know it’s a lie.”

“I’m sorry,” Freddie laments.

“I was trying to think of something to say, so I asked her what her favorite brand of sparkling water was,” Robbie relays miserably, shaking his head.

“Oh, Toro Chico, definitely,” Freddie says without missing a beat.

“See, that’s what I would have said!” Robbie agrees. “Though, Crystal Waters makes a *delectable* cranberry lime,” he adds thoughtfully.

They leave the party soon after, both definitely feeling the alcohol they drank. Freddie follows Robbie to his dorm, because it’s closer, and because it feels right to walk him home.

“Thanks for coming out with me tonight,” Robbie says.

“Sorry I didn’t help you meet anyone new.”

“It’s okay,” Robbie shrugs. “Maybe I just wasn’t meant to go home with someone tonight.”

Freddie’s heart is in his throat. He’s feeling reckless. He’s feeling brave. He’s feeling like he just got dumped and he can do whatever he wants and maybe it’s time to let himself be honest with a part of himself he rarely acknowledges. “That’s not necessarily true,” he says quietly.

Robbie looks confused. “What do you mean?”



“I could be coming home with you. If you want.”

Robbie pats his arm. “That’s sweet of you to offer, but I don’t need you to stay over to keep an eye on me.”

Freddie shakes his head. “Robbie, I…” But then, he doesn’t really know what to say, so he just kisses him.

Robbie squeaks. He seems to indulge the kiss for a moment, but then he pulls away, staring at Freddie. “How much have you had to drink?” he asks in concern.

“I’m not drunk,” Freddie tells him evenly. “I’m…” It seems like he’ll have to use his words, so he does his best. “I’m probably not thinking clearly,” he admits. “But this is also something I’ve wanted to explore for a long time.”

“You’re…” Robbie seems so stunned he can’t even say it.

“Yeah,” Freddie confirms, preferring not to have to actually *say* it himself if he doesn’t have to. He’s not like Robbie, who seems utterly unconflicted about his interest in all genders. He’s still learning to be okay with this. But he’s not going to go into all of that. “I’m not asking for anything serious,” he tells Robbie. “But if you’d like to take me home… I’d gladly go with you.”

And now it’s out there. And maybe if he’d thought about this more, he’d consider how bad an idea this is. But Robbie just looks awed. “Of *course* I’d like to take you home,” he tells Freddie softly.

They don’t say a lot as they head back to Robbie’s dorm. Freddie considers what this could mean. He *likes* Robbie. He enjoys his company. He also has been somewhat aware, even if he hasn’t wanted to look at it too closely, that Robbie might like him. He’s thought it might be the case ever since they first met.

He hopes he’s not taking advantage of him. Because Freddie doesn’t really know what he wants. He just knows that he’s single, and why not explore this?

But he also knows that if Melanie changed her mind tomorrow, he’d want to go right back to her. And he’d hate to hurt Robbie like that.

He wants to say all of this to Robbie, but it’s also too much to lay on him. As they go into Robbie’s dorm, Freddie stops him with a hand to his chest. “Hey, no strings attached, right? And no matter what, we’re still friends?”

Robbie nods seriously. “Absolutely,” he agrees, drawing Freddie to him to kiss him again.

When Freddie finds himself backed up against the side of Robbie’s bed, he’s abruptly nervous, and worries he’s about to blow up everything. He pulls back enough to speak. “This is new for me,” he tells Robbie, his voice quavering, from desire and from fear. “I need to… take this slow.”

He tries not to think about the fact that this is almost exactly what Melanie had said to him, the first time things got a little hot and heavy.

Robbie kisses him, very gently.

“Don’t worry,” Robbie says. “Tonight, all you have to do is kiss me.”

Freddie didn’t expect his first experience with a guy to be so *tender*, and *careful*. He stares at Robbie’s ceiling, as Robbie drifts off with his head on Freddie’s shoulder, the only way they both fit on this tiny bed, and he reflects as he waits for his brain and body to calm down that he wouldn’t have wanted it any other way.

## October 2015

“Okay, cut. Hang on,” Jade mutters.

Across the room, she sees Tori slump a little bit. Chandra gazes at her in concern. Jade is back behind the camera again for this project, a school assignment this time, and it’s already been a bit of a grueling shoot day. Chandra, one of the few people in her program that she can actually stand, is running sound; unlike the previous shoot she did with Freddie, which had no dialogue and where almost all sound was to be added in post and the camera’s microphone would be fine for anything that wasn’t, this project is much more dialogue-heavy. Jade trusts Chandra’s ear, and her ability to hold a boom mic steady.

The bigger problem is Billy, in the role of assistant director, who she brought on out of necessity to round out her crew. And yet again, they have to re-shoot this particular shot.

“Did we do something wrong?” Tori asks. She’s standing with Lana, the other actress in the project, and they both look a little frustrated. There certainly have been times when Jade has had to ask them for something different, which they’ve both responded to well, but it’s clear tensions are starting to run high. They’ll wrap for the day as soon as they finish this shot, though, which is good, because it’s clear they all need a break.

But it’s not the actors that made Jade call cut this time. “No,” Jade sighs. “Billy, we need the silverware reset for the scene. But also, this shot isn’t working for me, I need to reposition the camera,” she grunts.

“Oh, shit,” Billy says under his breath, then moves to reset the props in the scene. It’s been like this all day. He’s too busy looking at his phone to really, *actually* do the job he’s here to do. But Jade had been required to bring a certain number of people on to this project, and she’d helped him with something last semester. Never mind that Chandra is the one *actually* referring to the shot list, making notes, and keeping them on task. And she’s the one ready to move any lights after Jade moves the camera. While Billy just sits there.

At least this is her project and Jade can credit Billy how she sees fit. The problem is, even a basic production assistant credit feels too generous. She knows film school is about collaboration, but this hardly seems worth it.

She looks across the room and sees Tori. Tori catches her eye and gives her a slight smile. This part is one positive in this whole endeavor: collaborating with Tori. Jade doesn't know why they didn't consider it sooner.

Actually, she kind of does. There had been hesitation, from both of them, that maybe they might be too close to work together like this, on projects that feel more professional than the things Jade works on in her own time. That personal emotions, relationship strife or affections might get in the way of the actual purpose of the projects. Tori worried that Jade might not be honest with her about what she needed in a performance (which is stupid, Jade thinks, because when is she ever anything but honest?), and Jade had worried that Tori wouldn't be able to treat her seriously as a director because she knows her too well.

Maybe it helps that they're a little older now, and over halfway through college. They're both well on their way to feeling especially competent at their art and having the paperwork to prove it. They've both been on more sets, working with total strangers instead of their friends, have seen how other actors or directors function, and have learned how to maintain a professional atmosphere. Even Jade. High school Jade would be verbally eviscerating Billy right about now. College Jade knows that her real power is after they wrap, when she gets to be honest with their professor about what kind of "work" he actually performed.

Working on set is a different kind of intimacy. The things Jade shoots are generally written by her, with a few exceptions, so it's her *own* words that are formed by Tori's lips, her *own* concepts being brought to life. And acting is always an emotionally vulnerable undertaking, something Jade is well aware of, having been on the other side of the camera or onstage plenty of times in her life. Jade has collaborated with friends many times, but there's something special about collaborating with Tori, at this stage of their lives, when it feels more like they're honing specific crafts and producing things they might look back on proudly (Jade had been proud of a lot of her older work at the time she made it, even her "gay play" that she's never living down, but a lot of it makes her uncomfortable to look back on at this point).

"Okay," Jade says meaningfully. She looks toward Billy. He doesn't look up.

"Ready to go," Chandra announces in his place. Tori and Lana straighten up and return to their marks for the start of the scene. Tori reaches over to fix Lana's hair for continuity. Jade considers giving her a credit for hair just for that. Though, she and Lana are both probably getting credits for that, anyway. They were responsible for their own costumes, makeup and hair, within the parameters of what Jade wanted.

Jade nods to Chandra. "Sound?"

"Speeding," Chandra confirms, turning on the sound recorder and standing in place with the boom mic elevated over the actress's heads.

"Rolling," Jade announces as the camera begins recording. "Slate it, please."

"Oh, uh." Billy starts looking around for the slate. Jade closes her eyes for a moment to keep the homicidal urges at bay. Chandra has to lower the boom to hand Billy the slate. Which she has filled out properly, of course. Billy glances at it. "Uh, scene 3E, take 2."

“Action,” Jade says from behind the camera as she gazes at the little screen.

The scene flows smoothly from there, and Jade is happy with the footage. She and Chandra pack up the equipment, with Tori stepping in to do what she can; she’s familiar enough with Jade’s equipment at this point that she’s actually helpful. Lana offers a polite goodbye, and Jade thanks her. Billy tears down the set. Which, he is the one who found this location for her, at his friend’s house, so Jade supposes location scout is about the only honest credit she can give him.

Jade thanks Chandra sincerely, Chandra assures Jade she will work with her any time, and Jade and Tori get in the car together to drive back to the Hollywood Hills.

“What the *hell* is wrong with Billy?” is Tori’s first question. It bursts out of her, like she’s been holding it in all day.

Jade groans, letting out her own frustration. “I don’t know. He talks a good game, and I worked on one of his projects and he was fine. He’s probably just a lazy douchebag.”

“He reminds me of working with Dale Squires,” Tori says hotly.

“Don’t worry. He won’t be able to take all the credit the way that guy tried to,” Jade assures her.

“At least Chandra was there,” Tori sighs. “Leave it to women, always having to pick up men’s slack.”

Jade chuckles, but she doesn’t disagree. “She’s good people,” she agrees. “And you know I *never* say that.”

“You definitely don’t,” Tori laughs. “What’d you think of Lana?”

Lana is someone Jade hadn’t worked with before who Tori brought from her acting program. “She was good,” Jade assesses. “I felt like it took her a moment to get what I wanted from her, though that could have been my fault. But once she got it, she *got* it.” She considers further. “She had the right look for the part, too. Even more than I thought when I saw her headshot.”

“By that, you just mean she’s hot,” Tori teases.

Jade scowls. “Only one of us here has said that and it’s not me.”

“Relax,” Tori pats Jade’s arm. “Sometimes we have to work with hot people, but we just have to suffer through it,” she says placatingly.

“That’s it. You can walk home,” Jade drawls with faux sincerity.

Still, she appreciates that they can joke about this sort of thing now. Tori’s right. If they *do* actually work professionally in the industry, working with hot people is an occupational hazard. But ever since they got past Jade’s crush on Freddie, something changed between

them. They don't talk about *crushes*; Jade hasn't had another one to report, anyway. But they do tend to be more honest about when they encounter attractive people.

Jade at first kind of considered it a failsafe, a sort of accountability practice. By admitting the hot people were there, they could be put on notice to watch out for crushes, and ensure they recommit to each other. But she doesn't think that's what it is anymore. Instead, Jade considers this more of a practice of releasing jealousy. It's something she's gotten a lot better about over the years; she certainly hasn't forgotten the way she would practically froth at the mouth whenever an attractive girl would so much as *talk* to Beck, as if anything could happen with her *right there*, watching. But at this point in her life, she spends so much time away from Tori that she has long since realized that she just has to *trust* her.

It helps that Tori has really never given her a reason *not* to trust her. There had always been some part of Beck that had put Jade on edge, some part of his demeanor that had made her convinced he was hiding something. Of course, he *was*, but it wasn't what she'd been so afraid and jealous of for years.

"You looked good behind that camera," Tori purrs, breaking Jade out of her ruminations.

Jade glances over at her. "Yeah?" This isn't the first time this has happened. Seeing each other in a professional setting is sometimes just enough of a change to feel like catching a glimpse of each other with new eyes. Plus, with the vulnerability of this kind of work, it's a bit...inherently sexy.

"Mmhmm," Tori confirms. "Very authoritative. Very...*visionary*."

Jade suppresses a snort. But she's flattered, a bit. She looks back at Tori, just long enough to give her a once-over. "You were a *delight* to work with," she husks. "So eager to please."

"Maybe you can take me home and direct me further," Tori says suggestively.

Jade smirks. Tori isn't always so submissive, but it is the new moon. Maybe she'd really, *really* like to play with this side of her tonight. But she'll make her earn it. "Oh, I don't know," she says regretfully. "I don't want to abuse my power over you." She puts a hint of emphasis on the word *power*.

"But I'd *really* like to work under you again," Tori pouts, putting that same little emphasis on *under*. "I'll do *anything* to make that happen!"

Okay, the role play is veering into creepy territory. Not that it's not *hot*. But Jade is ready to shut it down. "Tori?"

"Hmm?"

"Your place or mine?"

Tori grins. "Yours."

Back home, in Jade's bedroom, Tori proves to be just as eager to please as Jade wishes. Maybe she's a little behind on her homework for the rest of the week from this overnight

with Tori, but it's totally worth it.

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He gets a text from Trina one Saturday night while he's working on a new song.

**Hey**

**You should come over**

Andre sighs. It's not like he doesn't want to see Trina, but he's starting to feel like he doesn't love this whole situation.

After they'd hooked up over Spring Break, he'd made clear to Trina the next morning that under no circumstances could they do it again. He'd felt *way* too guilty to face Tori for weeks afterwards, though the fact that they still took a class together and had regular study sessions made that a bit difficult.

By the time Andre started to feel a little better about putting his (admittedly, really great) night with Trina behind him, school was out. And at a party at Beck's, everyone got onto the topic of the fact that Freddie wouldn't be coming down for the whole summer because he was seeing Sam's sister.

Sam had been annoyed about the whole thing. "It's just *weird*," she'd complained. "Melanie and I aren't even *close*, so it's just weird that Freddie is close with us both."

"Hey, *I'm* close with your sister," Carly had pointed out, then added, "Kind of."

"Yeah, but that's different."

"How?"

But it had been Tori who came to Sam's defense. "Sam, believe me, I get it," she says. "Trina and I really haven't been close since we were kids, and I'd be *completely* weirded out if one of my friends dated her." She tilts her head to the side thoughtfully. "Of course, that's because Trina is completely *insane*..."

At the time, Andre had been momentarily convinced that Tori somehow knew about the hookup and was trying to scare him, but later on he decided he'd just been paranoid from the weed he'd smoked. There was *no way* she knew.

Still, that didn't stop him from discreetly cornering Trina at a party at Tori's house a week or so later. "Tori doesn't know about...us, does she?" he'd asked.

Trina had looked offended. "Of course not. It's none of her business."

“Okay. Good. Good.”

But just *seeing* her at that party was enough to rekindle things. Andre tried to be careful. He didn’t want anyone to catch the way they kept looking at each other.

There was no way to discreetly slip away during a party of just their friends. Any time someone did that at these parties, everyone noticed. But around the time Andre started coaxing Beck to the car to take him home, Trina claimed she’d gotten a better offer for someone else’s party and called a We Drive U.

Andre didn’t think much of it until he pulled into the driveway of his grandmother’s house and...Trina waltzed out of the bushes like some drunk Northridge girl who thought she just went hiking.

“Thank god,” Trina had moaned, brushing invisible debris off her arms. “Took you long enough.”

“What are you *doing* here?” Andre hissed.

Trina gave him a pitying look. “Well, I’m not here to see your grandma.”

“How do you know this is my grandma’s house?”

“I checked the paperwork in your glovebox. I overheard Tori talking about how you live with your grandma, and your car is in her name, which I distinctly remember her shouting in my face one time,” she finished sourly.

Andre hadn’t remembered her opening his glove compartment when she rode in his car last spring. “*When* were you in my glovebox?”

“While I was waiting for my We Drive U.”

“Tonight? My car was *locked*!”

“Yeah, and my dad’s a cop,” she’d drawled. “He has one of those lockout tools in the garage.”

“You *broke into my car*?”

“Well, you certainly weren’t taking the initiative to tell me where to meet you,” she said, almost scornfully. “But you were eyeing me *all night*.” She shrugged. “I figured I owed it to us both to figure out how to get here.”

Andre was beginning to see why Tori worried about people dating her sister. Trina was *completely* insane. But, they weren’t dating. Still, “We can’t go in the house. We’ll wake up my grandma!”

Trina rolled her eyes. “Way to get me in the mood,” she grumbled. She looked at Andre’s car. “Then let’s do it out here.”

Andre followed her gaze to the backseat. He looked back at Trina. "But, you're drunk. I'm not."

"Please, I'm not drunk, I've just been drinking tonight and I'm not stupid enough to drive," Trina scoffed. "Do you know what my dad would do to me if I got a DUI?"

Andre stared at her. "You really organized all this for a hookup?"

Trina tilted her head to the side, considering. "If I say yes, will you take the compliment and get in the car with me?"

Which is how they ended up in Andre's car for their second hookup.

"I can't drive you home," Andre said after it was over. "Someone might see me." Did he feel like an asshole for kicking a hot girl out of his car after he got his? Yes. But again, it was *Trina*. She'd orchestrated this, he felt certain she could find her way home.

"Relax," Trina said carelessly. "I'll call Sinjin for a ride."

"He'd really come this far to get you?"

"Of course."

He had. Andre had been stunned.

Their third hookup happened about a week later when Andre went up to the Valley to visit a particular music store and hit up Trina on the off chance that she was staying at Sinjin's apartment at the time. She was. He came over.

Since that point in the summer, they've been meeting in secret every few weeks. It's just sex. But Andre is starting to feel like it might be more than that.

He'd never really considered himself to be the kind of guy who just hooks up. Sure, he dates around a fair bit, but anyone he actually goes to bed with is someone he has some kind of genuine feeling for, or feels real potential with.

Until Trina.

He'd been a little intimidated by her ever since he met her at Hollywood Arts. He got used to her over time, though she still certainly has her moments when she's genuinely frightening, but the difference is, he isn't *repulsed* by it anymore. He's kinda into it, actually.

Part of the problem with the way he usually dates is that he just doesn't seem to choose women well. He'll think he's falling in love with a girl only to find out something about her that's an absolute dealbreaker a couple months in. Like she might be nice to him but mean as hell to everyone else. Or she's not actually interested in hearing what he has to say. Or she's a bad singer. The list goes on and on. Maybe he's just picky, but he also can't really help when his feelings about a girl just abruptly *change*.



With Trina, though, maybe because they've never tried to actually *date*...he just wants to know more about her. She's *interesting*. And so far she hasn't revealed anything about herself that's a total dealbreaker. Probably because he knows her well enough to already *know* everything that would be difficult to swallow if it was revealed by surprise. He already knows that she's obnoxious, loud, conceited, and a *terrible* singer. But she's also enthusiastic, funny, and endearingly protective of the people she's close to.

And, her worst traits have softened a bit since high school. Or, maybe that's just what he's telling himself because the sex is so good. But he's pretty sure.

In short, it's getting to the point that he thinks he might want to actually date Trina. See where this goes. They either have to take this route and come clean to Tori, or break it off for real. He can't keep living like this.

But maybe not today. He texts Trina back.

**No offense, but I don't really  
feel like driving all the way to  
the Valley tonight**

**I'm not at Sinjin's**

**I'm at my parents' house**

Andre grimaces. This has been a boundary he hasn't wanted to cross. Tori doesn't know anything about this, and it's hard enough to keep something like this from his best friend.

To hook up with her sister right under her nose would really make him feel *rotten*. He probably wouldn't be able to face Tori for a month if that happened. Not that it's too hard, considering they're not taking any of the same classes together this semester, but they do sometimes meet for lunch on campus.

But, he also really wants to talk to Trina, face to face. And his house isn't an option for her to come over.

**Are you sure no one else will be home?**

**Obviously**

**My parents are out of town**

**And Tori is at Jade's tonight**

Yeah, if Tori is at Jade's, she's not coming back until tomorrow. And Andre will be gone by then.

**Okay**

**I'll be there soon**

He vows that he's going to talk to her *before* anything else happens, but it just doesn't work out that way. Almost as soon as they're in Trina's room, she's all over him.

"We should talk," he manages, when there's a break in the kissing.

"If you want to talk dirty, go for it," Trina tells him.

"That's not what—" He breaks off, distracted by the way she's touching him. And moments later, he can no longer focus because of the dirty talk *she's* slinging his way.

By the time they've both come, Andre can barely move. Trina rests against his shoulder. He's beginning to think that the cuddling after sex might be his favorite part. It's the only moment he sees Trina not being *intense*. And Trina in repose is breathtaking.

She begins to sit up. He's disappointed that the cuddling is already over. "Hey, can we tal—"

"Shhh!" she shushes him.

He frowns. "What?"

Trina turns panicked eyes to him. "Tori's here!"

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It's just after fall break, and Tori and Jade have time for a night together over the weekend. They've gotten better about this over the semester. It isn't that the workload is any less, or any easier, but Tori feels like she's gotten better at managing it, and it seems that Jade feels the same way.

However, it isn't as though *no* homework will be considered tonight. Jade wrote a screenplay, and since Tori is going to play one of the roles, she took a copy of the screenplay and made notes. They're going to go over some of Tori's thoughts tonight. It's nice to feel like Jade

values her opinion. And, for both of them, sometimes just delivering the lines out loud is enough to see what might need to change.

But first, the moon is just about full, so the priority is going to bed together. Finding these moments to be intimate together, at least every few weeks, has also helped them stay closer this semester. There's still an occasional frustrated sense that they don't get enough time together, that sometimes one or the other will feel forgotten if they have a big project to work on that takes a lot of time and focus, but it's better, overall. Tori now knows to watch out for the times Jade is particularly withdrawn and moody, and Jade understands that when Tori wants to keep talking about their relationship that it probably means she needs some reassurance. The fact that they have opposing coping strategies probably isn't ideal, but they haven't been in a situation yet this semester when they are totally at odds. They're making it work. And collaborating helps a lot.

After sex, Jade has a pizza delivered, and as they sit at the kitchen table, half-dressed, with their pizza, Jade gestures vaguely to Tori. "You want to get out your screenplay notes? We might as well get started."

"Yeah, hold on," Tori replies. She hurries downstairs to get her monster purse from Jade's bedroom and begins looking through it as she wanders back upstairs. By the time she reaches the kitchen table, she still hasn't found it. She grunts a little in frustration.

"What?" Jade asks.

"It's not with my other papers. Hold on." Tori pulls out her stack of school notebooks and leafs through them on the table, while Jade watches with her eyebrows slightly elevated judgmentally. Tori hums unhappily, then digs around deeper in her purse, pulling out an empty water bottle, a makeup mirror, her wallet, a pack of tissues, a pocket knife. "Shit. It's not in here."

"Did you *lose* my script?" Jade asks, exasperated. "If someone else finds it—"

"No," Tori interrupts. "No, I know what happened." She sighs. "I left it on my desk at home. I was making notes on it there last night and had all my other school things already packed up. I must've left it there."

Jade looks unhappy. "Then go get it."

"Right *now*?" Tori asks, glancing down at her half-dressed form at her half-eaten plate of pizza.

"Fine." Jade rolls her eyes. "You can finish your pizza first," she says benevolently.

"Gee, thanks," Tori returns sarcastically.

She hurries to finish her pizza, then pulls back on her clothes so she can run home. This is annoying, but at least they don't live *too* far apart. Enough to be an annoyance, but not so much as to be a burden.

But when she pulls into her driveway, Andre's car is there.

That's strange. She wonders if they had plans and she forgot about it. But that doesn't sound right. They'd just spent time together over fall break and they try to see each other on campus every week or so. Tori thinks she would remember if they had plans.

She goes inside, kind of expecting Andre to be waiting for her in the living room, maybe playing the piano to pass the time. But nope. Tori senses around the house. She can smell that he at least was here very recently. She also thinks she hears Trina up in her room. "Andre?" she calls.

No answer. Just the sound of Trina doing...whatever she does in her room. Maybe dancing? Who knows with Trina. Well, this is weird, but Tori is here for a reason. She's halfway up the stairs when she nearly runs into Andre.

"Heeeey, Tori!" he drawls, laughing. He looks...disheveled. And he smells like...well, that can't be right.

"What are you doing here?" Tori asks, bewildered.

"Ah, well, I came over to see you, and, you know, the downstairs toilet wasn't working so I went upstairs to your bathroom." Well, maybe *that's* why he smells like Trina, if he was in their bathroom using Trina's soap to wash his hands or something. Yeah. That has to be it. The alternative is too horrifying to consider so Tori refuses to.

"The toilet's not working?" Tori heads down the stairs.

"It was running. It probably just needs the flapper reseated," Andre states.

Tori can hear from where she is that the toilet's not running, but she makes a show of popping her head in. "It's not running now."

"Oh. Well, maybe somebody had just used it or something, I don't know," Andre shrugs like it's no big deal.

"Is anyone else home?" Tori asks.

"I don't know," Andre replies.

"Then how did you get in?"

"Oh! Right. Trina's here, she let me in."

"Uh huh." Oh, god, something does *not* add up here. What her nose first sensed *can't* be true. "So, wait, why were you here?"

"To see you, of course!"

"I must've forgotten we had plans."

“Oh, no, I just dropped by. Was in the neighborhood.” He laughs a nervous laugh.

“Right...”

At this, Trina comes clomping down the stairs. She looks at Tori. “Oh. You’re here. I thought you were at Jade’s. Did you have a fight?”

“No!” Tori glares. “I just had to come back to get something.” She turns to Andre. “Um, so I’m not sticking around, I have plans for tonight.”

“It’s cool, it’s cool,” he drawls. “Like I said. I just dropped by.”

But now that Trina is down the stairs and close enough to her, Tori can *absolutely* sense that *she* smells like *Andre*. She looks between them with dawning horrified comprehension.

“No...” she whispered.

“What?” Andre asks. He’s *sweating*. And it’s a *terrified* sweat. He’s acting *so much* weirder than usual, they were *both* upstairs.

Trina shakes her head. “It’s no use,” she tells Andre. “She knows.”

“I know...oh, god, what do I know?” Tori asks.

“Andre and I are sleeping together,” Trina says almost conversationally.

“Wh—*what?!?*” Tori shrieks. She needs to sit down. Even though she *knew* this, almost as soon as she ran into Andre, she’d *refused* to accept it, and Trina’s confirmation feels like a ton of bricks. “How can you two *do this?!?*” she asks in horror, still staring at them as she sinks onto one of the couches.

“Well,” Trina drawls, “When a man tolerates a woman...” she begins.

“I don’t just *tolerate* you,” Andre frowns.

“*Andre!*” Tori squeals.

“Oh my god, Tori, would you grow up? This is none of your business. It’s just sex.”

“Actually,” Andre says. He glances at Tori guiltily. “I kind of wanted to talk about that.”

“Oh, my god,” Tori moans, looking between them, distraught.

“What about it?” Trina asks him.

They step away, and Andre clearly thinks he has some privacy as he quietly says, “I was wondering if you maybe wanted to try...you know. Seeing each other. For real.” A horrified Tori hears every word.

Trina rolls her eyes. “Of course I do, you idiot. I was just waiting for you to figure it out.”

“Are you *kidding* me right now?!” Tori hollers. “Did you really just become official *right in front of me*?!”

“Yeah, uh,” Andre wrings his hands. “I guess we did. So I’m...I’m seeing your sister.” And with that, he tries to bolt out the front door.

Tori is on her feet and blocking the door so quickly it clearly startles him. He backs away. She looks between them. “How long?” she manages.

“Like I *said*, not your business,” Trina replies casually.

“Since spring break,” Andre admits to her.

“Oh, my god, you’ve been fucking around for *months*!?” Tori wails.

“Yeah, and now he’s my boyfriend, so show some respect,” Trina orders.

“*That doesn’t make it any better!*” Tori doesn’t even know *why* she’s so upset. Trina’s not wrong; them fooling around *really* wouldn’t be her business, except that it was going along for *so long*, and clearly happening in a way where they were *hiding* it from her. Andre, who always tells her when he’s involved with a new girl. Her own *sister*, who...well, who she thought already had a boyfriend at her college, actually, so now she just feels *more* confused. She hates feeling like two people who are close to her couldn’t trust her with something like this because she might react...well, *exactly* like how she’s reacting.

Right as she decides she should probably calm down, because she’s breathing heavily, and glaring between them, Trina gives her a cautious look. “I know it’s almost the full moon, but maybe you want to take it down a notch.”

Andre looks confused. Tori shakes her head, trying to shake off *everything*, and it turns into a full body shudder as the mental image of Andre and Trina together hits her. “You’re right,” she says, though she’s still speaking through gritted teeth. “God, I need to process this.”

“And don’t worry,” Trina tells Andre. “We can hang out during full moons. I’m not like Tori.”

“Uhh,” Andre says, looking between them. “Okay?” But then, he adds, “What do you mean?”

“I mean I don’t change.”

“Change?”

Trina looks at Tori, who had been so lost in her own thoughts that she’d barely been processing the conversation, but is now staring back at Trina with horror. “You never *told* him?” Trina shrieks.

“No!” Tori yells back. “Why would I?”

“I don’t know, you’re all willy-nilly with the information, you told Jade before you were even dating her, before you could even *trust* her.”

“We were friends!” Tori insists.

“No you weren’t!” Andre and Trina refute in unison.

“*And* Cat knows!” Trina accuses.

“*Sam* told her!”

“Cat and Jade both know *what*?” Andre asks, looking completely bewildered.

Tori just shakes her head. She’d already outed her whole family as gay and Canadian in the past trying to hide this. She has nothing.

Trina gives Tori a scathing look, like it’s *her* fault Andre doesn’t know a secret he has no reason to know, then turns to Andre. “We’re werewolves,” she states plainly.

It’s kind of cathartic to watch Andre go through all the stages of denial, confusion, horror, and thousand-yard staring that *she* just went through.

He rapidly asks a bunch of questions, and Tori and Trina both offer him the best explanations they can. (“How do you think I knew Tori was home before you even heard her?” Trina asks him, which he seems to find particularly compelling).

But when it comes down to it, he decides. “I don’t know. I just don’t know if I can believe it unless I...*see* some evidence.”

Tori nods. “Jade was the same way.”

“Well, have Tori show you sometime during this next full moon,” Trina says easily.

“Why would *I* have to show him?” Tori challenges.

“Because *I* don’t change!” Trina shoots back.

“Yeah, wait, why don’t you change?” Andre asks her.

“Because it’s gross and weird and I want no part of it,” she says simply.

“It’s really not,” Tori tells him. “It’s...freeing, and a lot of fun.”

He looks between them, seeming completely overwhelmed. “Right...” he says slowly.

“Look, I’ll see what I can do,” Tori says. “Now that this is out in the open. I’ve gotta go.” And at that point, she gets out of there as fast as she can.

She’s halfway back to Jade’s before she realizes she forgot the screenplay *again*. And she doesn’t dare go back to get it at this rate.

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She and Tori have barely spoken since Tori arrived home unexpectedly and rudely interrupted her time with Andre. It's nothing really new. She and Tori don't talk much these days anyway. They kind of stopped being close around when Trina stopped changing, to be honest. Tori seemed to think Trina judged her and, well, Trina kind of did. She just can't really relate to wanting to become some kind of unappealing beast every month. Better to just stay her beautiful self, because *this* face has never let her down.

But Tori texts her to say that she and Andre are invited to their monthly ritual at Shadow Creek Park on Wednesday with Tori's other friends. Boring. But if it'll stop her new boyfriend's constant questions about the mere *possibility* of werewolves, fine, they'll go.

Tori's friends usually all meet at their parents' house before heading to the park, so Trina makes sure to be there, too. But when she arrives, only Tori is there so far. "Oh. Hey," she greets her sister.

"Hey," Tori nods. She tries to smile. "Thanks for, um, agreeing to come with us."

Trina shrugs. "Anything to get Andre to wrap his head around this." After a moment, she figures she should add, "Thanks for being the one to show him. Since there's no way in hell I was going to."

"Sure," Tori says easily, then admits. "It is a little weird. I had to really talk it out to get Sam and Carly on board. It's probably because he isn't any of our intimate partners."

"It's not like he's going to see you naked," Trina scoffs.

"...No, he won't," Tori says carefully. "But you *know* it's intimate, right? Like, you remember that?"

Trina doesn't remember it feeling *intimate*. She just remembers it as an annoyance. What fun is it to not be able to talk? The outdoors aren't all they're cracked up to be. "Well, he's your friend. And you showed Jade back when you were still basically frenemies."

"*When* will you stop holding that against me?" Tori complains.

"I'm *not*. It's just that none of *us* had a choice over whether you decided to bare our secret to that scissors-wielding, emotionally unstable grunch." Tori glares at her. Trina decides to walk back a bit of her remark. "You *have* softened her up a great deal the last couple of years," she offers as a compliment.

This makes a smile tug at Tori's mouth. "Yeah. I kinda have, huh?" Her mouth twists. "I didn't really *consider* that I was outing all of you, except for that time I accidentally told Beck we were all gay—"

"*What?!*"

"Long story. Don't worry, it was corrected quickly. But with Jade, I guess I kind of trusted her, like, implicitly? But I never really thought about whether it would matter to you. Or



Mom and Dad.”

“To be fair, I don’t think Mom and Dad care,” Trina says bluntly. Not much fazes their parents. “But at the time? It felt to me like you handed her *blackmail*.”

Tori winces. “I can see that. I’m sorry.” She raises her eyes guiltily to Trina. “She never used it against you. And she never would.”

“Not since you softened her up. She’s occasionally a lot less annoying and unnecessarily rude these days.” It’s almost supposed to be flattering.

Tori eyes Trina. “You know, I could say the same about you.”

This *doesn’t* feel like a compliment. “Wow. Thank you *ever* so much.”

“I mean it!” Tori replies. “Look, I know we’ve grown apart, and I don’t like that. For so long, it felt hard to even *talk* to you about anything important. But even just the other day, with Andre...I don’t know. You seem...different.”

Trina is still a little insulted, but she also knows that Tori isn’t wrong. She’d talked about this with Andre months ago, when they’d first hooked up. “I grew up,” she says simply. “And I’m doing really well in college, and I like my living situation, and I just feel...” She searches for words. “I feel more *grounded*. I know I sound like the dance teachers at Hollywood Arts, but it’s true.”

Tori nods thoughtfully. She hesitates, then asks, “Can I ask about your...living situation? To be honest, I kind of thought you already *had* a boyfriend.”

Ah. Right. Trina hadn’t done much to dissuade the notion that she and Sinjin might be involved, though less for his cover than her own. She was never planning to introduce him to her family in that manner, but it was easier to explain her unconventional living situation if she let her family believe she was staying with a boyfriend most of the time. This also kept her from having to tell Tori that it was *Sinjin*.

But. This is the first time she and Tori have ever *talked* in a long time. And with the fact that Andre knows about this already, and he’s about to become a bridge between them that they can either use to rebuild a closer relationship or cause him a lot of pain and strife...Trina decides to try honesty with her sister.

“Well,” Trina says, “You’re wrong. He’s not my boyfriend. I just let people think that because it was easier to explain.”

“So there *is* a guy?” Tori asks, curious.

“There’s two, actually.”

“Oh!” Tori seems surprised. “And you never wanted to date either of them?”

“Oh, god, no,” Trina scoffs. “They’re more interested in each other.”

“*Ohh*,” Tori nods, but then frowns. “I don’t know, I think the explanation of living with two gay guys makes more sense than pretending one is your boyfriend.”

Trina sighs. She decides to lay it all out, because giving information to Tori piecemeal is becoming annoying. “Okay, it’s Sinjin and Burf, they’re not gay, but they are involved *somehow*, I don’t know, it’s not my business, and I don’t care to know. I used the boyfriend explanation because that’s what Sinjin is using. He lets me stay there rent-free as long as I sometimes go to family events for him and pretend to be his girlfriend because his dad is an asshole.”

Tori stares. “You’re bearding for *Sinjin*?”

Oh. Right. Trina kind of forgot there was a term for it. “Guess so.”

“I thought you hated Sinjin!”

“He’s really not a bad guy once you get to know him,” Trina replies.

“Well *I* know that, I just thought *you* hated him.”

“Well if *you* know, maybe try telling your girlfriend that. He *really* admires her work and just wants to work with her again, but she blocks him everywhere.”

Tori raises her eyebrows. “Okay, maybe *you* could have passed that message along instead of *him* wrangling Jade’s phone number out of Sam! He really didn’t help his case by *stalking* her.”

“If I’d told you, I would’ve had to tell you my whole situation with him, and you would have judged me!” Trina shoots back.

“I wouldn’t judge you for bearding for him to keep him safe from his family!”

Trina throws up her hands. “Well, I don’t know, Tori, I can never tell with you what’s going to set you off!”

“What are you—”

“Are you just going to pretend you didn’t have a total freakout just a few days ago over me dating Andre?”

“I was surprised!” Tori shouts. “I had no idea you two even ever *saw* each other outside of occasional parties at our house!”

“No. You don’t think I’m good enough for him. Which is stupid, because obviously, I’m perfect.”

Tori pinches the bridge of her nose. “Okay, fine. I’ll admit I wasn’t thrilled about it. But the two of you...neither of you have the best track record with dating, and I don’t want you to get hurt.”

“Oh, right. So your concern was noble.”

“It *was*!” Tori shouts. “Andre can be so fickle, and you can be so self-centered, and he has such a big heart and you are a *very* strong personality and it just seemed like it could be a recipe for *disaster*!”

“Well, thanks for your concern, but I think Andre and I know more at this point about how we fit together than you do.”

Tori looks horrified. “I don’t want to hear about that!”

“What is *wrong* with you, I wouldn’t talk to you about that!” Trina shouts.

“What I’m *trying* to say is, I talked to Andre, and from his side, I get it now.” She looks at Trina. “You know what he told me? You challenge him. And he likes that about you. He likes a girl who knows what she wants and who is never anything but completely herself.”

“Yeah, that’s what *everybody* likes,” Trina drawls. Yeah, part of her narcissism is an act, but most of it? Trina genuinely believes that people would be happier if they just lived like her, doing what they wanted, at all times.

“I get his side now. So what I want to know is, what about you?”

“What *about* me?”

“What do you like about Andre?”

Trina almost wants to torture Tori by saying she likes the sex, but she did just honestly state that she does *not* want to talk about that with her sister. She chuckles, just once, as she thinks about Andre, not because of anything humorous, but because the thought of him makes her smile. “I like that he wears his heart on his sleeve,” she tells Tori. “Too many men are afraid of expressing their emotions. Not him. I like how he cares about people. How many teenage boys would have lived with a grandma like *Andre’s*, and taken care of her the way he does?”

“Trina, *you* wouldn’t take care of our grandma, and she’s much less unhinged.”

“And that’s why I like a man who *can*. So I don’t have to.” But Trina has more, surprising even herself. “And I like that he’s working toward a career that he’s actually suited for, and talented at. Too many guys I met at Northridge College just had no idea what they wanted to study or what they wanted to do with their degree after they got it. And who likes a guy who isn’t going to be able to pay own way in a few years?”

Tori nods. “You know, despite...everything about what you just said, I get it.”

“We’re *so* glad to have your blessing,” Trina rolls her eyes.

But actually, she *is* glad. Because she’d rather Tori be with them than against them.

Just because it’ll be easier that way.

Before long, Jade arrives, then Andre. Jade regards him critically from where she's sitting on the sofa, sipping a root beer. Trina's hackles rise.

"So," Jade drawls. "I hear you have a new girlfriend."

Trina moves quietly so that she's right behind Jade, ready to throttle her if she feels she needs to. Tori gives her a warning look, and Trina just stands still, glaring.

Andre looks a little nervous at the situation in front of him, but nods as amiably as he can. "Yep. Trina."

"Right," Jade replies. There's a doubtful note in her voice that makes Trina ball her fists, nails digging into her palms. "Well," Jade says casually. "You seem to have a thing for intense women. I suspect she'll be able to keep your interest."

Trina stares. She can't decide if this was a backhanded compliment, or just an insult, and whether it actually insults *both* of them. Fortunately, Andre breaks the tension by just chuckling. "Oh, she will *definitely* never bore me."

Okay, *that* felt insulting, too. "Excuse me, I am right here, you know," she says angrily.

Jade laughs softly. Andre looks confused. "What'd I say?"

Before Trina can elaborate, Sam, Cat, and Carly arrive with Inside Out Burger for everyone (except for Trina and Andre, because they're going to go out somewhere actually *good* after this boring trip to the werewolf park). They greet everyone, but unlike Jade, they don't seem to be all that concerned about Andre's new relationship. They're more interested in the fact that Andre will be joining them.

"So," Carly says warily. "I hear that you'll be joining us tonight." Her tone is very formal.

Andre nods. "Yeah. I just needed to see what it's all about, you know?"

"Yeah, I heard you doubt we exist," Sam grumbles.

"Tori and Trina have told me a lot and I'll admit, it's *starting* to make sense, I just...can't *fully* wrap my head around it yet," Andre explains.

"Which is *normal*," Tori says, coming to his defense.

"Yeah, you had to show *me*," Cat frowns at Sam.

"Yeah, but we'd just been roommates for a few months. Andre's best friend and his girlfriend are the ones telling him," Sam defends herself.

Trina *likes* being referred to as Andre's girlfriend, even in such an off-handed way by someone she's *definitely* not close to.

"I was certain Tori was pranking me," Jade admits.

Cat approaches Trina while the others make digs at Andre, and quiz him about what he already knows. Out of everyone here, Cat is the closest to ever being Trina's friend, and admittedly, Trina never had a lot of those. For the most part, she'd managed just fine without friends; she often felt like everyone at Hollywood Arts was jealous of her, which made closeness difficult. But Cat is someone who never seems to mind her company, and Trina has always tried to be kind to her in return. "Hey," Cat says with a smile, "Congratulations!"

For the first time, someone *actually* seems to be happy about her new relationship. Trina glows. "Thank you, Cat!"

"I'm so happy for you!" Cat bubbles. "Andre is great. You two are so cute together!"

"Well, I look good next to *anybody*, but you're right," Trina replies easily.

Cat giggles. "You're so fun!"

It's a bit of a non sequitur, but Trina *thinks* it's a good thing? Maybe she could give an actual friendship with Cat a chance one of these days.

After eating, Tori and her friends all get into Jade's car, and Trina and Andre follow in his car. When they make it to the park, the sky is in full bloom with the colors of the sunset, and Tori, Carly, and Sam begin walking toward a grove of trees. Jade and Cat stand near the cars.

"So, what now?" Andre asks.

"We wait," Jade says evenly.

"They go back into the trees for some privacy," Cat elaborates. "Because they have to get naked and because it looks kinda weird when they transform."

"It looks *gross*," Trina supplies, folding her arms.

"Hard disagree," Jade states. "It looks *awesome*."

"Maybe to a freak like you," Trina retorts.

"And I wear it with pride," Jade replies, unfazed.

"Guys," Cat frowns. "Don't fight."

"We're not," Jade and Trina say in unison.

That alone seems to disturb Jade. Trina can't say she enjoyed it either. They both stay quiet for the next few minutes.

"So when they come out, they'll be wolves?" Andre asks Cat.

"Yeah," Cat nods. "I know it might feel like a trick when you don't see them actually transform, but you'll see pretty quickly that the wolves are *very* much them."

*Them, but much stupider*, Trina thinks, but she doesn't say it aloud.

And only a few minutes later, the wolves emerge. Andre literally gasps at the sight of them, and as they move closer, he backs up a few steps. "Oh, whoa, okay," he murmurs. "They don't look quite right, do they?"

Trina feels triumphant, like maybe Andre understands why she wouldn't want to change into something so grotesque. It's Jade who replies, "Their proportions are a little bit different if you expect to see dogs or, like, *actual* wolves," she admits.

"Yeah, I can see that," Andre says slowly. The wolves are bounding across the dirt, knocking into each other, wagging their tails. Looking like *absolute* fools.

"Okay, you've seen them, can we go?" Trina asks.

"Wait a minute," Andre says. "Hang on, which one is which?"

"The golden one is Sam," Cat says, pointing, "But Tori and Carly look pretty similar at first."

"Carly's fur is just a little bit darker," Jade explains. Trina, watching them in mild discomfort, can easily tell the difference, even never having seen Carly as a wolf before. Maybe she can smell the difference, or maybe she's just used to how Tori looks. But it is weird.

"And Carly is just a little bit taller," Cat adds. "Like, just *barely*."

"Like when they're humans," Andre notes, sounding fascinated. He's looking between them all, and then he points at one. "Tori?"

Tori wags her tail harder and yips at him, then stands in front of him, as if she's presenting herself to him.

"You can pet her if you want," Jade suggests. "They love that." Indeed, Cat is already petting Carly, whose eyes are closed in bliss as Cat scratches her ears.

"Eww. Andre, do *not* pet my sister."

Tori growls at her. Trina sticks her tongue out at Tori.

Sam lowers her chest toward the ground and barks, a clear indication that she wants to play. Jade chuckles. "Oh, wait 'til you see this," she tells Andre.

"This is my favorite part!" Cat adds happily.

"Oh, god, what's about to happen?" Trina asks as Jade opens her trunk.

And pulls out...dog toys.

"Are you *kidding* me?" Trina wails.

“Oh, no,” Jade smirks. “Get a load of this. They *live* for this.” And she fires a tennis ball from her contraption, and the three wolves are off like a shot to retrieve it.

Andre laughs like it’s the funniest thing he’s ever seen. Trina shoots him a withering glare, and he shuts his mouth. “Um. Isn’t that kind of degrading?” he asks.

“No,” Cat answers, like it should be obvious.

“I’ll admit that Tori *really* wasn’t into the idea at first,” Jade says easily. “But werewolves need *exercise*, and I wasn’t about to go running through this creepy park in the dark. So, we found a way to bond and spend time together while making sure the wolf got to be active.”

Andre nods, “I guess that makes sense.”

“Besides, look at Tori,” Jade gestures. Trina can see Andre squint and look between the two brown werewolves, clearly trying to figure out which one is Tori. “If Tori didn’t like something I was doing, she could *absolutely* stop me, with no hesitation. She wouldn’t even have to *hurt* me. Though...she could also do that.” Jade appears *thrilled* by the notion that Tori could literally rip her throat out. Trina thinks she’s seriously disturbed.

“Okay, I’m ready for dinner,” she says pointedly to Andre.

Andre nods, seeming reluctant. “I’m getting hungry, too,” he admits. “But, before we go, can I just...” He takes the long, purple bone dog toy from Cat and flings it as hard as he can, then laughs in delight as the wolves chase it. “This is *wild*,” he murmurs.

Trina *definitely* doesn’t like that Andre would rather laugh over some ridiculous hairy beasts than spend time with her. She glowers at the whole group of them, at Tori with her stupid tongue lolling out, at Sam, who cocks her head with interest as Andre holds up the bone again, at Carly, whose tail wags so hard her whole body goes with it, at Jade and Cat, who grin wickedly as they watch Andre play with these three idiot creatures. Trina simply can’t understand how anyone could stand to *debase* themselves this way. And she’s not just talking about chasing dogs toys. The whole *thing*: the changing, the running around like a bunch of children. It’s all so ridiculous. She has so many better things to do.

Like her boyfriend.

“I’ll wait in the car,” she announces, then turns and strides away before anyone can respond.

It works. Andre is back in the car in less than twenty seconds. “Hey, sorry,” he apologizes. “I know you’re getting hungry. I’ve just never seen anything *like* that before.”

He’s clearly fascinated. Trina tries to relate, but all she can muster is a shrug. “It’s my whole childhood. Not that exciting for me.”

“I get that.” Andre begins to drive back down the lonely stretch of road away from the park. He seems deep in thought. Finally, he asks, “So, you’ve said you hate changing, but now that I’ve seen it firsthand, I guess I’m just curious why?”

“I told you. I hate feeling hideous and moronic.”

“But I don’t think they look hideous. And they seem to be having a great time.”

“Yeah, that’s *them*. Being a wolf isn’t fun for *me*,” she emphasizes. “I just don’t think it’s that great to get all dirty and be covered in hair. I prefer to stay human. I *like* how I look as a human.”

“No arguments there.” Andre gives her a quick once-over. “You look *really* good tonight,” he praises.

“Yeah. I know,” Trina replies.

“You still good with Nozu tonight?” Andre confirms as they drive.

Trina definitely is not. She’s craving something...heavier. “No,” she replies. “We’re going to Tucker from Down Under.” And she’s going to order the biggest steak they have.

Andre seems a little surprised, but he nods. “All right,” he agrees.

Trina enjoys her evening with Andre where, thankfully, he doesn’t bring up werewolves again even once.



# Sleep

**December 2015**

The semester has been...strange.

It's also been a success, busy, but rewarding. Freddie is happy with his grades, with what he's learning, with what he has left to learn. But it's not his classes that have been surreal.

It's Robbie.

He and Robbie aren't dating. Not really, anyway. And in the scheme of things, they actually didn't get to spend very much time together this semester. Aside from meals and time spent with other students in their program, that is. But alone time? Maybe every few weeks. Which, in the span of a semester, is only a handful or two of times.

That's how Freddie thinks of it, anyway. Because looking back on it *still* feels so strange sometimes.

Being with Robbie in the moment never feels strange. That's always fun. That's always *great*. Freddie's request to take things slow the first time anything physical happened between them has absolutely been honored by Robbie, maybe to the point that Freddie thinks they're moving *too* slow. But, Robbie's the one with more experience, and Freddie is too nervous to push. But he really *likes* the time he spends with Robbie. And not just because of the handjobs.

Robbie's funny, he's sweet, he's smart, and sure, he's a little awkward sometimes, but Freddie no longer finds that off-putting. He understands Robbie better now, has learned to anticipate his blind spots and the areas where he tends to trip up, socially. And to top it all off, Robbie's a good friend.

That's all they are. Friends with benefits.

Really, the only problem for Freddie, the part that feels the most incongruous, is the fact that he feels his sexuality is geared much more toward women, but he's starting to get to the point where he feels like he has more experience with men. It's difficult to wrap his mind around, difficult to conceive of his identity when his experience just doesn't seem to match it.

Just as the semester ends, he hears from Melanie. And in a way, it feels like waking up from a dream, as everything he feels for her comes surging back. He'd successfully put her out of his mind all semester; one thing Freddie Benson *excels* at is setting aside romantic feelings for someone he can't have. They hadn't even crossed paths accidentally. It had *worked*, more or less, this plan to take a break from each other.

And now, she wants to talk.

Freddie says yes immediately.

As finals week ends, the campus starts to clear out, but the coffee shop is still open, before dining facilities become more limited over winter break. Freddie and Melanie agree to meet for coffee (and tea) that afternoon.

As soon as he sees her outside the coffee shop, he finds himself grinning. She smiles back at him, and they hurry to meet each other in a crushing hug.

"I've missed you," he murmurs into her hair.

"Me, too," she replies, her tone soft, wistful.

Their conversation stays light as they get their beverages ("How was your semester?" "How do you think you did on your finals?" "What was your hardest class?") but as they begin to walk around campus under the mild winter sun, they grow quiet. Maybe neither of them are sure how to bring up the thing Freddie is certain they're both thinking about. Maybe they're both afraid that something has changed for the other.

Freddie reflects, for a moment, whether anything has changed for *him*, and finds it's not an easy answer.

"So," Melanie finally says. "Are you staying on campus this winter?"

Freddie hadn't made any final plans yet. He only knows he'll be spending a couple of days in Seattle during Christmas, presumably with Carly visiting her family, too. But he hasn't even gotten as far as seeing what his Los Angeles friends are up to during this break. He knows Robbie is heading back to Los Angeles for Christmas, explaining that his family still has plans even though they're Jewish, which Freddie supposes he can make sense of. But other than that, and spending some time with Cat, Robbie is planning to be at Stanford for break, too. He's not invited to any of Beck's parties, for obvious reasons. "I was thinking about it," Freddie lands on, as the most truthful but hopeful answer he can give.

Melanie nods. "I'll be here," she informs him, something he'd already suspected, since she doesn't seem to be in the habit of visiting family members for holidays.

"Oh," he says lightly. "Well then...maybe we'll see each other."

Melanie stops walking. She's rolling her cup of hot tea between her palms, but it appears more nervous than an attempt to warm her hands. "Freddie, when we talked last summer, we talked about the possibility of reconnecting. After the semester ended."

"Yeah," Freddie says softly, "I remember."

"And, well. We both thought it was possible. Provided you were still single." She lets out a nervous laugh. "So. Are you?"

Freddie...hesitates. Melanie notices, and her gaze drops, and Freddie tells her, as honestly as he can, "I'm not seeing anyone seriously."

"I see," Melanie says. She's scrutinizing him cautiously. "Well, does that, um, change anything for you about what we talked about?"

Freddie shakes his head slowly. "I'd still really like to see you. While you have the time."

Melanie's face splits into a grin. Freddie feels like his heart is soaring. "I'm so glad to hear you say that."

But Freddie thinks about Robbie. It wouldn't be a *breakup*, per se, if they stopped fooling around, but...*does* he want to stop fooling around? It feels like he's learning so much about himself.

Maybe he's selfish. Maybe he's horny. Maybe it's nice to finally be in a position where more than one person actually *wants* him. Maybe, ironically, it's actually Melanie's own twin's fault that Freddie even thinks he can maybe ask for this, and Freddie's awareness of the way being with two different people can potentially work.

"There's just one thing," he says to Melanie.

Her expression flickers. "What is it?"

"Do I have to stop seeing the other, um, person I'm seeing?"

Melanie gazes at him, and it almost seems like she can read *exactly* what he's asking. Freddie shifts uncomfortably. But slowly, she nods. "I...suppose that's only fair," she says warily. "Since you and I aren't actually serious, either, and I don't know if we'll be able to keep seeing each other when the semester begins again. I can't in good conscience ask you to be exclusive to me when we don't have any sort of commitment."

Just hearing that makes Freddie want to ask for a commitment, right now. But he knows it will be rejected. Melanie isn't going to let anyone get in the way of her life plans, her schooling, her path to the successful career she wants to have. No matter how much she likes him.

He takes it as a good sign that she likes him enough to circle back to him when she has time for him.

"I guess we'll just keep, you know. Working toward something," he offers.

She smiles. It's a little bit weak, but she clearly shares the sentiment. "That's where I am right now," she offers apologetically.

Freddie reaches for her hand. "It's perfect for me." They keep walking, hand in hand this time. He loves the way it feels to be able to walk out in public holding the hand of someone he's into. "Do you want to maybe go get some dinner in a little bit and catch up?" he asks.

"I would," she answers. "But until we're hungry, why don't we find somewhere we can go so you can kiss me?"

"How about right here?" he says, stopping them, and leaning down to press his lips to hers, slow and passionate, letting all the feelings he's been holding back reawaken, welcoming her back to him.

She pulls away after a long moment, looking absolutely beatific in her joy. “That was *wonderful*,” she tells him. “But what if I want you to kiss me in ways I *don’t* want anyone else to see?”

“Oh,” Freddie manages. He clears his throat. “Um, my roommate already left for break,” he suggests.

“Lead the way,” Melanie says gleefully. “But Freddie,” she stops him with a surprisingly strong hand on his arm.

“Hmm?”

“Just so we’re on the same page, I still need to take things slow.”

Freddie wonders when “taking things slow” will stop being his life story when it comes to intimacy. Maybe he’s just drawn to very sensitive partners. But he’s so excited to get to be with Melanie again that he doesn’t care how slow they have to move. “I understand,” he assures her.

And he does.

Because taking things slow with a guy is something he has needed, too.

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The full moon falls on Christmas this year, and Cat couldn’t be more excited. She *loves* Christmas. It’s one of her favorite times of year. But it’s also a time of year that has historically, occasionally, been a little sad.

Like the first year she celebrated Christmas without her parents, and she and Sam had gone to church, and Cat had confronted the fact that something that used to give her a lot of meaning and comfort no longer felt so wonderful. That had actually been a pretty good Christmas, overall, but she still has a sense of melancholy when she remembers that last beautiful Catholic mass, and how it felt to say goodbye to the faith she was raised with.

The last few years celebrating with Sam and Nona had been fine, if a little lonely. Cat is used to big family gatherings, and she’s had to get used to quieter Christmases.

But this year is going to be even more special because Carly is staying in Los Angeles and, in fact, Spencer is visiting here instead of her going to Seattle. The combination of a full moon and the holiday with her girlfriends is too much for Carly to pass up, and with her father unable to make it back to the US for the holiday, she and Spencer simply had to choose who would travel.

Apparently, Freddie isn’t thrilled that Carly won’t be in Seattle with him, and is even less thrilled that Spencer won’t even be there to offer him a place to get away from his mother. But Cat heard Carly on the phone promising to find a way for Spencer to give Freddie a key to their apartment, so he can at least *pretend* to be visiting Spencer when he needs some

respite. Cat wonders what it must be like to have such an overbearing mother. She doesn't envy Freddie.

Spencer's visit is brief, and he'll be staying in Carly's studio apartment, leaving Carly to stay with Sam and Cat. Which isn't unusual; when school is out, she's at this apartment a lot anyway. And they kept the king sized bed from their brief attempt at living all together, so there's plenty of room for all three of them to sleep comfortably.

It's nice to be on break again, to be able to spend more time all together. Cat enjoys her classes, but this last semester was a bit of a challenge, with transferring to a new, unfamiliar school. Carpooling with Carly had been fun, though, and Cat even got to drive Carly's car some of the time. She got her license over the summer, finally, but she still defaults to being a passenger most of the time. It's more comfortable for her that way.

And, of course, it's great to see other friends over the break. Beck's status as a heartthrob is becoming solidified with his fan-favorite character on his show. It's kind of surreal to hang out and smoke weed with a guy whose photoshoots are shared by thirsty people all over Splashface. Beck seems neutral about his growing fame; he only complains that it makes it more difficult to hook up with guys sometimes.

Because, oh yeah. The breakup with Robbie.

Robbie's absence at these gatherings is strongly felt. Freddie is absent, too, staying in NorCal for the summer ("to be with my sister," Sam had groaned, irritated), but it's Robbie who Cat misses the most. She's going to see him after Christmas, though, and she's excited about that. She really hopes he's doing well. He seems to be, from the texts they've exchanged over the past semester, but she really wants to see him in person and judge for herself.

The plan for Christmas is pretty simple, and it starts with Christmas Eve as a wolf night at home.

Spencer had arrived the day before, and Carly invites him over for Christmas Eve dinner. Cat makes a ham, one that isn't ready until after the sun sets, but it's absolutely part of the plan, because Sam claims that ham tastes even better when you're a wolf.

It's certainly the most unconventional Christmas Eve meal Cat has ever had, with two wolves eating ham out of bowls on the floor, while she and Spencer both sit at the dining nook and have a polite conversation over ham, mashed potatoes, and green beans.

Cat enjoys the chance to get to know Spencer a little better. Especially in a scenario in which Sam and Carly can't do much to defend themselves beyond growling as she coaxes Spencer to tell her stories about trouble they got into when they were young. In a way, though, it's fitting, to spend time here with the only other person who has regularly spent time with Sam and Carly as wolves in an apartment.

After dinner, they watch TV for a while, the wolves get rowdy and Spencer chases them around the house (thankfully, this apartment is much more suited to roughhousing than their last one, though with two wolves, they do have to be careful), until suddenly, it's getting late.

“We should go to bed,” Cat suggests, “Santa won’t come to our house until we’re asleep.”

Spencer doesn’t seem to know what to say to that. Cat would explain, but...all she knows is what she’s been told. Santa is coming. So she just nods earnestly at him until he nods back uncertainly. “Right,” he says. “Well, we’d better not keep Santa.”

“We’ll see you in the morning!” Cat tells him as he takes his leave and begins to head toward Carly’s apartment.

Then, she gets ready for bed, where two fluffy wolves are waiting to snuggle up on either side of her, keeping her warm all night.

Until...

Cat wakes up to the sound of a crash from the front of the house. She scrambles upright in bed, as both wolves press against her, as if to keep her from getting out of bed. “What was that?” she hisses.

Sam growls in warning. Carly nudges her comfortingly. But Cat has to know. She slips out from between them and scrambles off the edge of the bed as they both follow her, keeping in front of her like they’re trying to keep her safe. As Cat moves toward the door, she grabs the baseball bat that Sam uses on her hitting tree.

As Cat exits the room, both wolves appear resigned to the fact that Cat is absolutely going to check on this sound and hang back in the bedroom, which only makes Cat suspicious. If it *is* something dangerous, surely they’d come with her?

But as she nears the end of the hall, Cat sees him from far away, in the darkness, lit up only by the lights of the Christmas tree that he’s wrestling back into a standing position.

“Santa?” she whispers in awe. Okay, she didn’t *actually* believe Santa was coming, but here he is, and hey, she had to accept the reality of werewolves, maybe Santa is next?

He turns and drawls at her in a familiar voice. “Oh, hi Cat!” But then he clears his throat and his voice pitches lower. “I mean. Ho ho ho! What’s your name, little girl?”

But Cat has already recognized his voice. “Goomer?”

His shoulders slump. “How’d you know?” he asks, disappointed.

“What are you doing here?” Cat asks. There’s no way Goomer is *also* Santa. He’s way too young, for one thing. She’s willing to go back to assuming that Santa isn’t real, but that doesn’t adequately explain why Goomer is in her living room in a Santa costume.

“Well, I got hired!” Goomer explains. “I need to deliver the presents to your house, just like Santa, because Sam was afraid if they were hidden here, then someone might snoop!”

“Oh.” Cat’s shoulders sag. That *someone* is absolutely her. She’s gotten a lot better about snooping, especially since the Yay Day disaster, but she is definitely the reason Sam had to pay Goomer to drop off their presents.

“Where is Sam?” Goomer asks.

“Slept through this, I think,” Cat lies.

Goomer nods, though he’s looking around, like he expects her to reveal herself at any moment. “Well, you should go back to bed,” he states, but then adds, “Can you ask Sam what I’m supposed to do if you find out about the presents before morning?”

“Don’t worry,” Cat assures him as she walks back down the hall. “I won’t snoop.”

“Kay kay,” he replies happily.

But as Cat comes back into the bedroom, she locks eyes with the two wolves waiting on the bed, staring guiltily back at her, and abruptly, she recognizes the necessity of Sam’s plan.

Sam had asked for Cat’s gifts so she could hide them all until Christmas, and presumably, had done the same for Carly. Cat had actually assumed everything was just stashed at Carly’s, but she’d forgotten to consider the fact that, as wolves, Sam and Carly *couldn’t* go get the presents in the middle of the night to put them under the tree. And, even though Cat has gotten better about snooping, she has to admit that if she were the one in charge of putting out the presents in the middle of the night on Christmas Eve, that the temptation to snoop would likely have been *too* strong. And the plan for Spencer to travel had been pretty last-minute, so they probably couldn’t account for him in the plan.

Hiring Goomer allowed Cat to be surprised, and Sam and Carly to enjoy a night as wolves, cuddled up with their lover, a Christmas treat for them all.

Her face softens into a smile as she looks at them both.

She climbs back into bed between them. “Merry Christmas,” she whispers.

Carly whines slightly in return, and Sam nuzzles her hair, and both wolves stand up and turn around before settling back down on either side of her, so they can sleep through the rest of the night.

The morning is wonderful, with all the presents under the tree (and only a few broken ornaments). Nona arrives soon after they wake up, followed shortly by Spencer. Cat has never really tried to explain to Nona the intricacies of her relationships with Sam and Carly, but Nona knows how important they both are to her, and she treats them like family. That treatment extends to Spencer, once she finds out he’s Carly’s brother.

And then, it’s just a happy morning, with Nona and Carly cooking breakfast, Spencer admiring the condition Sam had kept her motorcycle in, and even Dice dropping by, something that Cat is happy he’s able to do more now that they live close again.

Carly has never really seemed to quite understand how, exactly, Sam and Cat developed a friendship with their young neighbor (and for a while, seemed even *more* confused as to how Sam has started making money working with a high schooler), but she’s never objected to his

presence. But something about this Christmas seems to make her understand him a little better.

“Can I hide out here for a bit?” he asks. “My Aunt Fergene is making me crazy,” he moans.

“Sure!” Cat replies.

“Have some bacon,” Nona offers. “You’re still a growing boy, right?”

Dice looks down at his own lanky body and shrugs. “Maybe?” He’s not tall for a man, somewhere around Carly’s height, but he’s certainly taller than Cat. Cat wonders if he really has stopped growing yet.

“Is it rough when family visits?” Carly asks him sympathetically.

His brow crinkles before he seems to realize what she’s assumed. “Oh, my Aunt lives with us all the time,” he answers. “She’s always injuring herself and my mom takes care of her. Luckily, her broken leg just healed up. But that just means she’s *everywhere* in the apartment. Like, I turn a corner, and *there she is!*” He runs a hand through his curly hair in agitation. “It’s impossible to have privacy when she’s *not* injured.”

Carly looks sympathetic. “That’s rough,” she states. “My house growing up was always the place to come hide out if you didn’t want to be at home. This is my brother, Spencer,” she introduces Dice. “He always welcomed any of my friends for any reason.”

“And sometimes for *no* reason!” Spencer adds.

“It’s nice to meet you.” Dice chews on his bacon and sidles up to Sam. “So, have you got the money for...Santa?” his voice drops to a whisper.

Sam rolls her eyes. “Goomer knocked over our tree and broke some ornaments. Once I subtract the value of them, *then* I’ll pay you.”

Dice looks frustrated. “I suppose that’s fair,” he relents.

“So your mom just takes care of your aunt all the time?” Sam asks.

“She’s always getting injured,” Dice replies.

“*How?*”

Dice shrugs. “Who knows? Bad luck, I guess.”

Sam nods thoughtfully. “We babysat a kid like that once,” she admits.

“Poor Oscar,” Cat agrees, wincing at the memory. “I guess your mom is just drawn to a sad case,” Cat laments.

“Like Carly, letting me and Freddie in her house all the time,” Sam smirks at her own self-deprecating remark.



“Oh, please, I didn’t befriend you because you were both pathetic,” Carly defends herself. “I befriended you because you’re annoying. And Freddie...” She frowns. “I don’t really remember why I befriended Freddie.”

“That I can live with,” Sam replies with a grin.

It’s a wonderful Christmas, and the addition of Spencer and Carly makes the apartment feel full. It’s not like her childhood Christmases, with all her aunts and uncles and cousins at Nona’s old house, but it’s more people than she’s celebrated with in a long time.

Cat reflects that a big family is something she really loves. And a family made up of her friends might be better than any other kind of family. And she can’t wait to spend time with more of her friend-family tomorrow night at Shadow Creek Park.

They all spend time with each other into the evening, and when the house finally clears out, it’s just her and her two girlfriends, human-shaped, beneath the full moon.

Cat might’ve considered Christmas sex sacreligious a few years ago (if she’d ever even allowed herself to *think* about it), but at this point in her life, she feels like it’s the closest thing to the ecstasy of the saints that she’ll ever experience.

-

Tori wakes up on Christmas morning for the first time curled up on top of her bed, recently changed back into a human. Jade had left the night before, because she was expected at home on Christmas morning, and Tori whimpers slightly, in her half-awake state not yet fully aware that she isn’t still a wolf. She clumsily covers herself with her blankets and turns over to go back to sleep again.

When she wakes up later, she smells food cooking. It’s Christmas. Maybe it doesn’t hold the same excitement as it did when she was eight, but it’s still nice to have a relatively peaceful day with her family. At least until later, when she and Jade are planning to spend the evening together, once family obligations are finished.

Downstairs, her mom has actually made breakfast for everybody (at least the scrambled eggs and sausage; they each prepare their own toast) and the family follows their tradition of eating at the table before they take their coffees to the couches and start opening presents.

But before they all make it to the couches, there’s a knock on the front door. Tori is the closest, so she sets down her coffee cup and goes to answer it.

Jade is standing on her front porch. “Oh!” Tori exclaims in surprise. “What are you doing here?”

Jade looks disgruntled and slightly upset. “I had to get out of my house. Can I come in?”

“Of course. What *happened*?”

Jade seems too angry to care about being overheard as she steps inside, rolling her eyes and pulling off her leather jacket. “Oh, just my dad deciding that this must be the one time of year

he has to pretend to care about me.”

Tori winces. “I’m sorry.” She glances behind her at the curious gazes of her family. “Um, is it okay if Jade hangs out with us for a while?” she asks.

“Of course,” Tori’s mom says, without missing a beat.

“Gee, if I’d known it was allowed, I’d have invited my boyfriend,” Trina sneers.

“Perhaps your boyfriend is lucky enough to be having a good morning,” Tori’s dad says tactfully. “Hungry, Jade?”

“Yeah, actually,” Jade admits, attention turning toward the kitchen.

“Tori will show you where the eggs and sausage are,” her mom says politely.

“But we ate all—oh.” Tori realizes her mom is suggesting that Jade make her own breakfast.

Luckily, Tori’s dad steps in. “Don’t be silly, dear, Jade is our guest.” He smiles at them. “Tori will prepare you some eggs and sausage.”

Tori sighs, but she also smiles. “Come on,” she tugs Jade’s elbow. “But you can make your own toast and pour your own coffee.”

“I think I can handle that,” Jade says, looking concerned as Tori gets eggs out of the fridge. “I’m not going to regret this, am I?”

“Of course not, I know how to make breakfast,” Tori says haughtily. She turns the pan on and dribbles some oil in, then asks, “How do you want your eggs today?”

“Over medium.”

Tori drops the egg onto the skillet, where the yolk immediately breaks. She winces.

“Wouldn’t you much rather have scrambled?”

“After you already put one in the pan?” Jade asks skeptically. She leans over Tori’s shoulder, then sighs. “It’s fine. Just fry it.”

Her family has paused anything to do with gifts while Tori takes care of Jade’s needs. While Tori knows it probably seems odd to Jade that she has to make her meal, she also understands that it’s a gesture of respect from her parents: Tori is entrusted with making Jade’s meal because Jade is *Tori’s*. Not in an *ownership* sense, but in a *love match* sense. Tori’s time, energy, and resources are used to care for Jade, in the most basic act of love. Well, the *resources* are technically her parents’, which just shows even more approval. As adults in this family, acts of care, such as their mom making breakfast for them, are reserved for special occasions as she and Trina make their way into the world. It’s simply the way things are.

And now, Jade is essentially being accepted by the family as they stand by and let Tori cook for her.

After Jade eats and has some coffee, she watches TV with Tori's family, who still wait to open gifts so that Jade isn't left out. After a little bit, Jade's phone buzzes.

"My brother says my dad is gone," she reports. "I guess I'd better go back and check on my mom." She politely says her goodbyes to Tori's family, even Trina, to both of their surprise.

Tori walks her to the door. "See you later?"

Jade nods, smiles slightly. "Be back later." And with that, they share a kiss in front of Tori's whole family, something that makes Tori feel blushy and exposed in a way she hasn't felt in a long time.

Her family has very little reaction as Tori heads back to the couch. Her mom says fondly, "I think it's nice that you both have found humans who can accept you."

"Okay, first of all, Andre doesn't have to accept anything," Trina argues. "And second of all, it's not like I'm going to *marry* him."

"You're not?" Tori asks. Of course, it's a stupid thought, but all she can think of is that she'll have to deal with their breakup someday, and she does *not* want to be in the middle of that.

"Tori, I'm like literally twenty-one," Trina says irritably. "I don't even know if I *want* to get married yet."

"Does Andre know this?" Not that Tori thinks Andre is about to propose or anything, but she also gets the sense from him that he sees this as, you know. Long term.

"I don't know, but it's his business more than it's yours," Trina shoots back.

"I was only a little older than you when I married your father," Holly tells Trina.

Trina looks sour. "Things have changed since forty years ago, Mom."

"I am not *nearly* that old." Holly sounds offended.

"I'm happy for you both, too," David cuts in to keep the fight from escalating. "I'm just glad you can choose who you like. My grandparents were pretty into arranged werewolf marriages. It can work, but I'm sure glad I married your mom and didn't get set up with some second cousin somewhere."

"We're glad, too, Dad, we like existing," Tori says quickly, hoping to keep her parents from getting too sappy about each other in front of them. "Anyone need more coffee? Whose gift is that big one over there?"

Later on, Jade does come over, and that night after Trina goes to Andre's house, and Tori's parents are downstairs watching a movie, they have stealthy sex in Tori's room. As great as it is to be adults who can drive to each other's houses to take advantage of whoever's parents aren't home, there's something kind of *hot* about sneaky sex, about feeling like they're getting away with something. Especially on a major family holiday.

The next night is their trip to Shadow Creek Park. And this time, Cat drives her Nona's car behind Jade's, because Spencer is with them. Tori is glad to see him, and also happy for Carly, since she's clearly delighted to have her brother around again, though it does cause the trouble of logistics again when they have to find an area to change where they won't have to see him naked and he won't have to see them. This time, though, they manage to convince Spencer that he's fine on the outside of the grove of trees, where the three of them changed last time.

"You know, I love this park," Carly says as they strip down in their regular clearing. "But I wonder if maybe there are some other options we could explore."

"I'd be open to that," Tori replies.

"I used to go to the hiking trails to change before Tori showed me this place," Sam tells Carly. "For such a sprawling city, there's actually a lot of nature around. Granted, a lot of it is like this, desert dirt and tough little plants. But isn't there a whole forest north of the city?"

"The Angeles National Forest, yeah," Tori confirms. "The mountains we can see that way are part of it." She points.

"That's really not far at all," Sam muses.

"Sam, no," Carly says sternly. "We're not exploring that far tonight."

"Okay, fine," Sam responds. "But as much as this park works really well when it's just us, it starts to feel a little small when someone else joins us. At least as far as human spaces go."

"Yeah, but it's not like anyone else might join us other than Spencer," Carly points out. "Both of your sisters don't change."

"See, that's the thing, I wonder if Melanie might, if it were safe," Sam muses. "Not that I really want to invite her to visit. It'd probably be really annoying, especially with her gushing about Freddie all the time."

"I'm sure she could keep her gushing to a minimum," Carly replies dryly.

"I like the idea of having a space that can handle more of us," Tori says thoughtfully. "I mean, I doubt Trina's ever going to change, but I definitely never expected to meet Sam." She's been thinking about this, a little, with her parents essentially giving her and Jade their blessing this morning. And Andre and Trina, for that matter. For a while now, these friends who come to Shadow Creek Park all together have felt like a family to Tori. As corny as the word *still* feels to use, they feel like a pack. Bringing someone like Spencer in feels easy, natural, like *he's* family, too. And now with Andre being aware of them...

Maybe their pack can grow, in a way. And maybe it would be nice to have somewhere to grow *into*.

But for now, it's the day after Christmas, the moon is full, and they can play and romp beneath the first winter moon, the cool air feeling crisp and delicious in their lungs, their fur

fluffed out to keep them warm, their humans bundled up in their coats, laughing as they watch them fetch dog toys and play.

It's been the most wonderful Christmas in recent memory.

## February 2016

It's the week before Valentine's Day when Robbie gets an unexpected call.

It's been a weird semester, after a weird winter break. The classes are fine; Robbie has no issues paying attention to subjects he finds generally boring, that's how he's always done so well in school. Staying busy, being in class, having things to do, that's all good, because it distracts from the weirdness.

The weirdness's name is actually Freddie. But that's not entirely fair to Freddie, because he's fine, he's not doing anything wrong, it's *Robbie* who's making it weird.

It all started when Freddie approached Robbie, early in winter break, to let him know that things were back on with Sam's sister Melanie, at least through the break.

"But we can still keep seeing each other!" Freddie had added right away. "I talked with her about that, and she's okay with it, and I just wanted to make sure you were on the same page, too."

Robbie didn't *know* how to feel, because Freddie's excitement was *palpable*, and already, there was a part of him that was certain he was about to be left in the dust. But all he said was, "I'm glad we can keep, you know, doing what we're doing." He tried to smile as he wiggled his shoulders.

"Me, too," Freddie replied. "Because I do really like—what we're doing," he said quickly. Which, *naturally*. Robbie wasn't exactly expecting any big feelings from Freddie. For all that he's clearly *bisexual*, he doesn't seem to be into Robbie in any kind of romantic sense. Which is fine with Robbie. He's *fine* with what's happening.

"I do, too," he replied, the only honest answer he'd trusted.

"And, you know." Freddie looked deeply uncomfortable. "If we ever progress beyond, uh, what we've been doing, or if Melanie and I ever move past second base, we can talk about... that."

*What we've been doing.* Where they are (the same place they *were* then) is where Robbie is comfortable, for now, without a deeper connection. But he isn't going to tell Freddie that outright. It doesn't seem fair to ask a guy who *can't* love him to pretend in order to explore sex with men further. There are plenty of other places Freddie can go for that. But he trusts *Robbie*. "I understand," is all Robbie had said.

And he'd figured that was that. Until the start of the semester, when Freddie came to him and said, "So, I know I told you that Melanie and I were only going to see each other over the

break, but, she decided she likes me enough that she wants to try to see me during the semester, too.”

“Oh!” Robbie had said, trying to sound excited for his friend. “Well, that’s great for you!”

“It’s still not serious,” Freddie explained. “And she’s still not even sure she has much time for me. So we can still see each other. If you want.”

“I’m good with that,” Robbie replied, trying for casual.

Robbie knows that sometimes his only option is going to be “good enough.” Cat has tried many times to tell him otherwise, Beck had said the same thing before he’d dumped him, which kinda made it all a wash, but Robbie understands that sometimes, he’s just going to have to take what he can get. If he can be a safe outlet for Freddie to explore his bisexuality with a friend, why not? Freddie’s hot, they have a good time together, and it’s not like Robbie has time for feelings, anyway. They—him, Freddie, and even Melanie, from the sound of it—are all trying to make the best of their busy schedules and their hormones. Robbie would much rather hook up with a friend; anonymous hookups don’t hold much appeal.

He finds out from Freddie that, of course, he’s planning to spend Valentine’s Day with Melanie. It’s not a shock, especially when Freddie explains that it was their first date last year. Robbie gets it. He’s not cut out for the romantic holiday with the hot guy. Big surprise. It’s not like Freddie would be about to take him out to dinner when their entire relation—friendship-with-benefits happens within the confines of (usually) Robbie’s dorm room. The public stuff is for the straight-passing relationship. Even sometimes when he’d go out with Beck, no one seemed to realize they were on a date. Maybe he’s more palatable as a secret, anyway.

He doesn’t really have time to feel bad about the situation. He has school to focus on, comedy to work on, and then, a phone call he doesn’t expect.

*Beck.*

Should he even answer? It has to be a butt dial. Do people still butt dial? Maybe only elderlies. He’s so paralyzed by indecision that the call ends.

No voicemail. Just a text.

**Hey**

**Call me**

And, after a moment:

## If you want

*Does* he want? Robbie can't help but be afraid that this is only going to open up old wounds, but it's *Beck*. He's curious enough that he decides he might as well see what he wants.

Beck picks up on the first ring. "Hey."

Robbie shifts immediately into some overly cheerful persona who probably works retail. He has no idea. He didn't choose this. "Well, hey there, Mr. Oliver!" he chirps. "What brings you to my ears?"

To his surprise, Beck chuckles. "Yeah, okay," he says, "I've definitely missed you."

Robbie doesn't know what to say. "Well, thank you!" he replies. He's still in the general ballpark of this weird, fake voice, but he's starting to come out of it. He just doesn't know how to approach Beck genuinely right now. His ex-boyfriend is, like, a TV star, who probably hundreds of thousands of people are fantasizing about regularly.

"Can we talk?" Beck asks, "Like, for real?"

Robbie twists his jaw and slaps one side of his face to try to snap himself out of whatever bizarre performance has taken root. He's mostly successful as he says, "Sure. What about?"

"Like I said," Beck says in a measured tone, "I miss you."

*I miss you, too.* It would be so simple to say. So honest. But a part of Robbie is still afraid this is all one big joke. Is Beck sitting there right now with some gym rat twink who is stifling laughter behind his palms, wanting to hear Beck torment the "weird guy" he went to high school with who had a huge crush on him? Okay, probably not. Beck isn't *cruel*. But who knows how a year in the spotlight might change someone? "I know what you mean," is all Robbie feels safe saying.

"I was thinking about last year," Beck says. His tone is almost always so *stoic*, it can be especially hard to read him over the phone, but Robbie thinks he sounds a little bit melancholy. "And how *badly* I botched Valentine's Day. And our entire relationship. And I want to try again."

"Try *what* again?"

"Us."

"With *me*?"

"I can't really try us again without you," Beck says with that particular note of exasperation in his voice.

"But *why*?"

“You want a *reason*?” Beck seems surprised. Maybe he expected Robbie to grovel. But Robbie waits, his heart thudding in his ears, unable to believe this might be happening. Finally, Beck says in a faraway voice, “Because, I’ve been with a lot of people since we broke up. But no one who makes me feel like you do.”

It’s...*so* sweet. But it can’t be true. Robbie voices it aloud before he can stop himself. “That can’t be true.”

“Why is that so hard for you to believe?”

“Because—you—you’re *Beck*.”

“And Beck loves Robbie,” Beck answers plainly.

It’s *silly*. But it’s also exactly what Robbie has wanted to hear, has been *craving*, since they broke up. He wants to accept *immediately*. Beck wanting to come back to him is the antithesis of all the fears that made him pull away from Beck the last year or so that they dated. Beck has tasted fame, and West Hollywood’s finest, and he *still* isn’t ready to leave Robbie behind.

And maybe someday, Beck *will* meet a better match for him. It’s only been a year. But at the same time, it’s nice to feel like *someone* wants to prioritize him.

Still, there’s one issue Robbie feels certain they really can’t work around. “But we’re still so far apart. I still have at least a year and a half of classes left. Probably more.”

“I can fly up to see you every few weeks, whenever we both feel like we have the time to make the trip. It’s a quick flight,” Beck explains. “I’m about to buy a ticket right now to see you on Valentine’s Day. If you want.”

*Right*. Beck must be doing well enough that he can easily afford to fly now. “I don’t know,” Robbie answers, mostly because he’s *overwhelmed* by the prospect.

“Do—do you already have plans?” Beck asks, sounding anxious and disappointed. “Are you seeing someone?”

“I’m no—I don’t have plans,” Robbie confirms.

“...But you’re seeing someone,” Beck infers.

“Sort of,” Robbie hedges. “It’s not serious.”

“It’s Freddie, isn’t it?” Beck asks.

“It’s—wh—why would you—”

He can hear the disappointment in Beck’s voice. “I worried that he’d take advantage of your feelings for him.”



“He’s not taking *advantage* of me!” Robbie argues, though as he says it, he wonders if it’s true.

“Sometimes straight guys—”

“He’s not straight!” Robbie declares, before he remembers that Freddie *really* isn’t out. “And it’s not Freddie!” he adds.

“Really.” It’s not a question. Beck *doesn’t* believe him.

Robbie needs to protect Freddie. “*Really*,” he assures Beck.

“I see,” Beck replies with forced neutrality, clearly skeptical. “Are you in love with him?” he asks directly.

“No,” Robbie answers, and this much is honest. As much as he likes Freddie, as much as he wishes for more and believes that he *could* develop real, deeper feelings for him, he’s not in love with him, not now.

“But you don’t want to stop seeing him,” Beck intuits.

Robbie sighs. He thinks about the way Freddie has made certain that he and Robbie can still see each other even though he clearly prefers Melanie. Robbie feels like he owes Freddie some reciprocation in that regard. He may have loved Beck, could probably fall in love with him again easily, but at least Freddie is *here*.

Beck obviously gathers everything he needs to know from Robbie’s non-answer. “Do you want to be with me? I mean, would you say yes if it weren’t for him?”

That’s easy. “I would.”

“Then...” It’s Beck’s turn to sigh. “Then as long as we’re long distance, let’s try being, like, open.”

“Open?”

“Like an open relationship.”

“I know what it means.” Robbie considers this. “What does it mean?”

“It means,” Beck says slowly. “That you and I can get back together. We can spend time together when we’re in the same place. And when we’re not? You can see your *mystery* guy.” He can’t quite keep the bitterness and disbelief out of his words. “And I can, you know. Get my needs met.”

“So you can just be with *whoever*?”

“You can, too,” Beck suggests.

But he should know Robbie well enough to know that he isn't going to just seek *anyone* out. At the same time, though, it seems to be a fair offer. Does he love the idea of Beck meeting up with hung guys on the apps? Of course not. But Beck clearly doesn't love the idea of Robbie with Freddie, even if it's unconfirmed to be Freddie.

Compromise is supposed to be a thing in relationships. And maybe Beck is being more than generous, considering *exactly* who he is.

Robbie misses him. He'd *loved* him, so deeply, before he'd begun telling himself that he didn't deserve him. And *Beck* still wants *him*.

He thought he'd never get another opportunity like this again.

"Come up for Valentine's Day," Robbie tells him.

"Yeah?" Beck sounds eager.

"Yeah," Robbie replies. "But if we do this, I need you to not worry about the guy I'm seeing, or resent him."

"I don't *resent* him," Beck replies, unconvincingly.

"I'm serious," Robbie says, wondering if he's really in a position to be leveraging anything right now. "You don't need to worry about him. He's just a friend. And besides." He weighs his words carefully. "He doesn't *know* me like you do. No one does."

"I see," Beck says, and Robbie can hear the warmth in his voice. "Then I'll see you next weekend. Should I book a hotel?"

"You know what?" Robbie says. "Yes. Let's do it."

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Toward the end of February, Carly is in her apartment, working on homework, when Spencer calls her. Her first thought is that he needs her to help pay his rent. It hasn't happened in a while, but sometimes, if he can't get ahold of their father, Carly will use their father's credit card to pay Spencer's rent, with the principle that it's easier to ask for forgiveness than permission (and the principle that Carly, his "sweet little girl" who is in college, is easier to forgive than his thirty-something son who can't seem to hold a traditional (read: "paying") job).

It's with this assumption in mind that she answers the phone. "Yeah?" It's a little brusque, but she had been focused on her homework. This is the whole reason why she has her own apartment, so she can focus.

"Carly!" Spencer greets, loudly and excitedly.

"Hey, Spencer," she replies, trying to soften her tone, because it's not that she *doesn't* like hearing from him. He'd been a daily part of her life for so long. Though she would never say it out loud, she often misses him more than she misses her father. "What's up?"

“I have some *great* news!” Spencer announces. “Okay, are you ready for this?”

“Okay, sure, hit me,” Carly replies, sitting back in her chair comfortably. Probably he got another great sculpture gig. He’s had more, smaller opportunities lately, but maybe he finally landed something impressive.

“So, Socko’s moving to LA, and I’ve decided I’m coming with him!”

“You’re—wait, oh my god, you’re coming *here*?” Carly asks. She’s immediately excited. “Spencer! That’s so great!”

“I know!” he gushes. “I got one of my best jobs there, and there are *so* many more opportunities for me. I could work on sets! It was just the kick I needed to realize that there really isn’t much left for me in Seattle anymore, and it’s time to move on.”

The realization hits Carly gradually. “Wait a minute, then *that* means—”

“Yeah,” Spencer replies apologetically. “You’ll have to get Dad to fly you up in the next couple months if you want to go through the stuff in your room.”

“I—” She hadn’t even really been thinking about things in her old bedroom. “But—the *iCarly* studio—”

“I know,” Spencer says, in that same regretful tone. “It’s a total bummer, that space was *great* for you guys. But it’s not like you use it anymore.”

“No, I know, I just—this is my childhood *home*.”

“It’s mine, too,” Spencer replies. “I still sleep in my childhood *bedroom*. But once Socko leaves, I’ll have *no one* here anymore. Well, except Gibby, I guess, but it’s not like he comes around anymore.”

“I’m sure he’s out living his best life.” When was the last time any of them talked to Gibby? Maybe she should reach out. But more importantly, “But if you don’t live there anymore, then...Seattle is no longer home.”

“I don’t think it’s been your home for a long time, kiddo,” Spencer says gently.

He’s right. She *knows* he’s right. But Carly just wasn’t ready to hear that the home she grew up in, that holds so many memories, that holds what feels like her entire *history*, is about to be occupied by some dumb stranger who will probably petition for management to close off the elevator and turn the studio space into something dumb like a *nursery*. For *babies*. Who aren’t Baby Spencer.

She tries so hard to look on the bright side.

“Well, when are you moving? Do you already have a place in mind?”

While Spencer rattles off details about the move (beginning of May, Socko found an apartment in Sherman Oaks, Spencer won’t even have to worry about rent at first because

Socko makes enough money), Carly thinks about the Seattle apartment, her first home.

She'd considered the possibility that Spencer might move out someday, but she'd really hoped he wouldn't. In her mind, it had served as a sort of...fallback. Like if everything fell apart in Los Angeles, if she flunked out of school and both her girlfriends dumped her and all her friends decided they hated her...she could always go back and live with Spencer, and sleep in her old bed, and stare at her old gummy bear chandelier.

She guesses it's akin to feeling her roots being pulled up, leaving her disoriented, ungrounded.

But she *should* be grounded. It's not like moving back to Seattle is something she necessarily even *wants*. She's happy in Los Angeles, with her friends, her two girlfriends, her school. Having Spencer live closer will be even *better*. Especially if she's not the one who has to live with him. Socko can be the one to keep the fire extinguishers charged and at the ready.

Maybe it's because of the fact that she's still living in a studio apartment by herself. It's probably her best living situation in Los Angeles so far, but it's still not *quite* what she wants. She wishes she could live with Sam and Cat, but they can't afford a bigger apartment, with the money her father and Cat's parents provide to help with rent. She likes living close to them, and she knows she needs the privacy her own space can offer for now, but it does feel eerily lonely sometimes to live by herself, the same way it used to when she lived across town.

When she'd lived with Sam and Cat, she'd never really done as much decorating as she'd hoped. She'd bought a few things here and there: a Bigfoot Crossing sign, a cool vintage rug that she really liked, a trippy painting by one of Sam's art classmates with a lot of geometric shapes and contrasting colors, a VW Bug-shaped cookie jar, a lamp with a rustic sea glass mosaic shade, the surfboard art piece Spencer made for her. It's all just *individual* things she likes. She can't find an *aesthetic*.

Her studio apartment is mostly just the same things she bought when she shared an apartment with Sam and Cat. At least it has more character than her old place. It still feels like not enough.

Los Angeles is her home. Maybe the problem is she hasn't figured out quite how to make it *feel* like it, the way the *iCarly* studio used to.

# Epidemics

## March 2016

UCLA's Spring Break is early this year, actually falling the week of the full moon near the end of the month, overlapping with Jade's at USC, but not with Freddie's at Stanford. It's lucky, because Sam suspects that if this had been a school week, that they would not be able to get together for this full moon. She's seen how busy her girlfriends are, heard Jade gripe about her workload. Last month at least had a Sunday night full moon, which hadn't been ideal but they'd been able to make it work. But school night full moons are clearly becoming more fraught as school becomes more intense.

For a while, though, it had seemed possible that Carly might go back to Seattle for Spring Break. Sam had even briefly entertained the idea of going with her. Spencer would be moving to Los Angeles in a little over a month, and had told Carly that anything she wants to salvage from the old apartment, she needs to come sort through. Carly had strongly considered heading back to her old bedroom to see if there were any clothes she wanted, or if there was anything from the old studio she thought she could bring back, but ultimately decided it wasn't worth it.

"Whatever is there, I haven't needed it for almost four years," she'd explained to Sam. "I have plenty of clothes. And...I don't know if I want to go back just to say goodbye to the old place. Maybe it's better to just remember it as it was."

Sam can understand that. Going back to Seattle doesn't have much appeal to her, either, and she especially doesn't want to see the old *iCarly* studio if it's naked and sad. Carly's right. The memories would be better than seeing it all torn down.

So with Spencer informed that he can just clear out all of Carly's old stuff, and Freddie unable to come down to visit to work on anything, they have a free and clear week of spring break to spend with friends and each other.

Or so they thought.

Dice shows up on Monday morning. "You have to help me!" he cries as he bursts through the door. Carly is over, relaxing on the couch with Cat, while Sam is in the kitchen getting herself some more coffee.

"No, we don't," Sam sneers. Working with Dice on his weird business ventures has made them closer, but for Sam, "closer" doesn't always equal "nicer". Especially not if they're annoying. Which Dice is.

"No, I'm serious. Please?" Dice pleads.

"What's the problem?" Carly asks, sounding concerned.

Sam groans. "Carls, no, don't, if we ignore him, he'll go away."

Dice ignores Sam and instead turns his attention to Carly and Cat. “I have to go on this stupid field trip for school, I can’t get out of it. I need you to watch Goomer for me.”

“Again?” Cat asks.

Carly looks around between everyone. “Isn’t Goomer an...adult?”

“Sort of,” Dice answers. “But there are times when he has *very* specific dietary and medication needs, and if I’m not there to watch him, I need someone else to do it!”

“He can’t...feed himself?” Carly asks skeptically.

Dice turns to Cat. “Will you just do it?” he begs.

Cat frowns. “I can’t believe you’d ask us to after what happened last time.”

“Well,” Dice says haughtily, “I have to trust that you learned from your mistake last time.”

“Don’t worry,” Cat says brightly, “I’ll make sure not to put eyedrops in his mouth this time.” She nods confidently.

Dice’s mouth thins. “You put mouth drops in his eyes! You blinded him!”

“Oh. Right,” Cat says regretfully.

“You *blinded* him?” Carly asks, alarmed.

“Temporarily!” Cat defends.

“This sounds like a terrible idea,” Carly says warily.

“When would it be, anyway?” Cat asks, apparently ignoring Carly.

“Tonight and tomorrow night,” Dice says, sounding eager, like he thinks they’re about to accept.

“Nope,” Sam says immediately. “Can’t.”

“What do you mean you can’t?” Dice asks desperately. “I know you’re all on spring break.”

“We have plans,” Sam says, looking significantly at Carly and Cat.

“Ohh,” Cat says, nodding.

“She’s right,” Carly agrees, “We do.”

“*Overnight* plans?” Dice presses. “He can be left alone during the day, he just has to get his morning and nighttime medicines.”

“Yep,” Sam says, “Overnight.”

Dice looks bewildered. “Okay, *what*, how many people are you three sleeping with?”

“*What?*” Cat asks, “Gross!”

“Sex is not the *only* reason to have overnight plans, you know,” Carly informs him.

“Well, can’t you cancel it? Postpone it? This is *really* important for Goomer’s health and safety! I’m not asking you as his manager. I’m asking you as his *friend*.”

Sam looks over at Cat and Carly. She can tell by their expressions that they’re both clearly wavering. And, she knows as well as they do that they *can* postpone their plans. Tomorrow night is only the first night of the full moon. They have two other nights they can spend in the park; they’re just all eager to go. “Fine,” Sam says irritably. “We’ll watch him. I’ll text Tori,” she adds, to Carly and Cat.

“Is Tori your—”

“*Don’t* even say it!” she shouts at Dice, who mimes locking his lips closed, looking mischievous.

“You guys are the best!” he crows immediately afterwards. So much for locking his lips.

“Yeah, yeah,” grunts Sam.

“I’ll bring him by later tonight! Thank you!”

Sam shakes her head as he leaves. “Why do we even let him in our house?” she asks.

“Because he’s our friend,” Cat says simply. “And your boss.”

“Ugh, he is *not* my boss!”

Dice brings Goomer by that afternoon, with a rotisserie chicken for his dinner (“and you didn’t think to bring me one?” Sam shouts, outraged), as well as a day and night weekly medication container, the kind old people have. “It’s *very* important that he takes *all* his medication,” Dice stresses, “The night ones are before bed. The day ones are for when he wakes up. Got it?”

“Gee, I never would have guessed,” Sam says sarcastically. She’s still mad about the rotisserie chicken.

“What about his eyedrops?” Cat asks.

“He doesn’t have any eyedrops!” Dice shouts. “Also, right now he’s not on any tongue drop medications. So all he has to do is swallow *pills*.” He glares at them all. “Think you can handle that?” he asks.

“I dunno, do we have to check his cheeks like he’s a dog?” Sam asks, looking at Goomer warily.

“No!” Goomer declares, insulted.

“It wouldn’t hurt,” Dice murmurs.

“Fine. Go do whatever stupid thing you have to do.” Sam waves him off. “By the way, overnights are double our normal rates. And we calculate our costs by the weight of the kid we’re babysitting!”

Dice groans. “Whatever, I don’t care, I just need Goomer to be okay.” He places a hand on Goomer’s shoulder. “Be good, buddy. I’ll see you in a couple of days.”

“Kay kay,” Goomer replies with a grin.

They all watch as Dice leaves. Then they all look at each other. “So,” Carly drawls. “What now?”

Sam shrugs and flips on the TV. “TV until dinner time? We should order Tubba Chicken.”

The first evening with Goomer is fine, she guesses. They hang out, have some dinner, get Goomer set up on the couch (which really isn’t ideal since he’s so tall, but he makes it work), and go to bed. Since they’re on a break from school, Carly stays over. That part is all fine and great.

It’s the next night that Sam is already annoyed about. The first night of the full moon, and they have to be stuck babysitting a grown man instead of having a wolf night, or a wolfsbane sex night. Whatever. At least Dice will be paying through the nose.

In the morning, Sam doesn’t even get to sleep in because Goomer is being so loud in the front of the house. But she can smell that someone is also cooking breakfast (and that maybe breakfast is steak and eggs? Hell yeah), so she gets out of bed.

“Good morning!” Cat and Goomer chirp at her in unison.

Sam just groans in response, already annoyed.

“Here,” Carly says sympathetically, giving Sam a cup of coffee and a kiss on the cheek.

Sam sits on the couch drinking her coffee while she waits for breakfast to be ready. As she cooks, Cat asks, “Oh! Goomer, your morning medication!”

“Oh, yeah!” he drawls.

“Are you supposed to take any of it with food?” Carly asks, picking up the days of the week medication container.

“I don’t know,” Goomer replies.

“Okay...” Carly drawls. “Well, you’re about to eat anyway, so why don’t we go ahead and do your medications.”



“Kay kay,” Goomer agrees.

Sam listens vaguely as Carly hands a couple of pills to Goomer and makes him open his mouth to show her that he swallowed them, but then, Carly says. “Sam? Can you come here for a minute?”

“*Why*,” Sam groans. Is she going to have to wrestle Goomer into submission to make him take a particularly large pill or something?

Carly gives her a significant look, then hands her a pill. “Does this look familiar to you?” she asks pointedly.

“No, it—” Sam starts to reply automatically, just from being irritated, but immediately sees what Carly is getting at. “*Oh*, shit.”

“*Yeah*,” Carly says.

“What?” Cat asks from across the kitchen.

“What?” Goomer echoes, looking confused.

“Goomer,” Sam says slowly. “Why are you taking wolfsbane?” Across the room, Cat gasps.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Goomer replies.

“We know what this is,” Carly tells him.

“I don’t!” he insists.

“This *has* to mean that you’re...” Sam trails off, waiting for him to finish the sentence.

“I’m Goomer!” he shouts. “I don’t know what you’re talking about! Let me talk to my lawyer!”

“Your *lawye*—” Sam pinches the bridge of her nose. “You mean Dice, don’t you?”

“*Maybe!*” Goomer cries.

Sam exchanges a glance with Carly. “He should probably take it,” Carly says. “Unless this is some elaborate plot of Dice’s to frame us for his murder...”

“Nah,” Sam decides. “Even if Goomer would be worth more to him dead than alive, he wouldn’t do that. Goomer’s his best friend.” Though, she considers this. Maybe there’s a life insurance policy? “I don’t *think* he would, anyway,” she amends.

“Real comforting,” Carly drawls. “Here, Goomer, take your wolfsbane.”

“It’s a *vitamin*,” he argues, but he takes it and swallows it, and shows Carly that he’s not hiding it anywhere in his mouth.

They wait for a moment. Nothing happens to him. No seizing, no frothing at the mouth.

And then, he simply collapses.

“Oh, *fuck*,” Sam cries, grabbing him.

“Oh, no, Goomer!” Cat yells, “Quick, do C3PO!”

“CPR,” Sam corrects, but then she realizes Goomer is shaking.

With laughter.

“Gotcha,” he drawls with a grin.

“I’m going to kill you—” Sam reaches for his throat. It takes both Cat and Carly to pull her back.

“Shit,” Carly swears as they all three stare at Goomer, who sits wearing a cheerful smile as he eats his breakfast. “So he really is a…” she trails off.

“I’m just Goomer,” he answers with his mouth full.

“He’s not going to talk to us,” Sam shakes her head.

“Dice probably swore him to secrecy,” Cat agrees.

“We’ll just have to talk to Dice when he gets back,” Sam says grimly.

In the meantime, they have the most awkward wolfsbane night at home that they’ve had in a *long* time.

“Look, Goomer,” Cat tries. “Doesn’t the moon look pretty?”

“It looks like the moon,” is all he says.

“There you go,” Sam tries over dinner. “Keep eating your meat. That’s important for this time of the month, huh?”

“I don’t have a time of the month,” Goomer insists. “I have a penis.”

“Gross,” Cat mumbles.

Carly disappears into the bedroom and comes back moments later. “Do you guys smell that?” she asks, shooting Cat a pointed look so that she’ll be quiet.

Sam does, immediately. Carly must’ve spritzed some of the air freshener in the master bathroom way on the other end of the apartment. Cat looks puzzled, and Carly surreptitiously watches Goomer.

Who just gives the air an exaggerated sniff and proclaims, “I don’t smell anything.”

Sam is actually starting to wonder if maybe he’s *not* a werewolf after all. There’s no way he’s this good at lying. But then, how can they explain the wolfsbane? She and Carly were *so*

*certain.*

“Maybe it wasn’t wolfsbane,” she suggests to Carly when they’re all in the back bedroom, getting ready for bed.

“But it *was!*” Carly insists.

“I know we both *thought* so, but what do we know? There could be a dozen like actual pharmaceutical medications that look *exactly* like it.”

“Unmarked gelatin capsules that look like they’re filled with purpley plant matter because *they are?*” Carly challenges.

“...I mean, okay, *probably* not,” Sam amends. “It’s just that I don’t think Goomer could actually *keep* this from us if it’s the case. I just wish we could get a better look at that wolfsbane tablet.”

Carly’s eyes gleam. “Maybe we can.”

Sam gets it. “The pill case.”

“Here’s the plan,” she says in a hushed tone. “We wait for him to fall asleep. You go out and get the weekly pill container. Bring it back here and we’ll see what his other pills look like.”

“What are you talking about?” Cat asks as she comes out of the bathroom.

“*Shh!*” They both shush her out of reflex more than anything else.

“Geez, okay,” she says, offended.

“We’re going to steal Goomer’s pills and see if there’s more wolfsbane in there,” Sam tells her quietly.

Cat looks excited. “Ohh! I just *know* he’s lying!”

They wait in the bedroom until they can hear what sounds like the breath of deep sleep coming from the front. Sam creeps out to the front, walking as quietly as she knows how.

In the kitchen, she cranes her neck to look over toward the couch. Goomer appears to be fast asleep.

He snorts, nose twitching.

Sam holds still.

He seems to subside back into sleep.

Sam watches him out of the corner of her eye as she looks for the days of the week pill container, where they all last saw it on the kitchen counter.

It’s not there.

Sam bares her teeth in frustration, looking all around. She checks the floor beneath the kitchen island, the dining nook, she even creeps closer to the couch to find out if she can see it anywhere.

It's not there. The pill container is gone.

Frustrated, Sam makes her way quietly back to the bedroom. She shakes her head as she walks back in.

"*What?*" Carly asks. "Why didn't you get it?"

"I can't *find* it," Sam growls.

"That's ridiculous. It was *right there* on the counter!"

"Well, it's not there now."

"Let *me* go look." And with that, Carly creeps out to the front.

Only to return moments later looking stunned.

"It's not there. It's *nowhere* to be found!"

"I told you!" Sam replies.

"Then, that just proves it, then," Cat says quietly.

"Proves *what?*"

"He must've heard you two talking, and he *hid* it," Cat states calmly.

Sam nods slowly. "I think you're right."

"We'll catch him in the morning," Cat says slyly.

In the morning, Sam gets up with Cat and Carly because she's so eager to actually see Goomer's pills and prove that he's taking wolfsbane. But when they come out front, Goomer is fully dressed.

"Good morning!" he says cheerfully. "I already took all my pills."

"But—" Carly starts, then amends, "But Dice said we needed to make sure! How can we do our job properly now?"

"I dunno," Goomer drawls, shrugging.

"Well, can we see your pill container so we can check?" Cat suggests.

Goomer digs around in his backpack before pulling out the container. He opens the hinge for Wednesday morning. "See? It's empty."

“Wait, I think I see one still in there—” Quickly, Sam attempts to grab it.

Just as quickly, Goomer snatches it away. He gives her a critical look. “My medical conditions are private and you have no right to pry,” Goomer states unequivocally.

“So you *do* have a medical condition?” Sam counters right back.

“And it’s none of your business.” Goomer closes his pill container and stashes it back in his backpack, then puts his bag on and sits on the couch. “I’m staying right here until Dice comes to get me,” he declares.

“Go ahead,” Sam tells him. She’ll deal with Dice when he gets here.

He shows up around noon, coming in cheerfully. “Hey, guys!” he greets. “How did Goomer do?”

“Oh, he did fine,” Cat assures him.

“We did have one problem, though,” Carly adds.

“Oh, what happened?” Dice asks.

“Well,” Sam draws. “We have no idea if he actually took his pills this morning.”

“I did!” Goomer insists. “I showed them the empty pill case and everything!”

“But we didn’t *see* him take them,” Sam emphasizes.

“Gooms, why didn’t you listen to me?” Dice implores. “I need to be *sure* you took that medicine!”

“They were being nosy!” Goomer says. “I did it to protect myself!”

“Nosy?” Dice asks, sounding skeptical.

“Maybe a bit,” Sam admits. “Tell me, Diceneo...” Okay, a first name as ridiculous as Dice’s is *not* very intimidating, it turns out. “What do you know about Goomer’s medication?”

She can already tell that he’s starting to sweat. “Well, I’m not a *doctor*, I just know he needs to take it.”

“But you’re the one who sets up his pills, right?” Sam presses.

“Well...yeah,” Dice admits.

Sam knows now that Dice *must* understand the purpose of wolfsbane. “There was one pill that caught our eye...kinda purplish...very unusual.”

Dice’s eyes are wide. “Really?” he asks, still revealing nothing.

“We know he’s taking wolfsbane, Dice!” Cat hollers, losing patience completely.

Dice is motionless. “How do you know about wolfsbane?”

“How do you think, genius?” Sam retorts. “*My* question is, why is Goomer denying everything?”

“He’s just doing what he’s supposed to do,” Dice explains. He looks at the three girls in turn. “Wait. There’s no way. You three are...?”

They all stare at each other in silence.

“Okay, one of us has to actually *say* it,” Carly says impatiently.

Dice finally takes the plunge. “You’re *werewolves*?” he asks, astounded.

“Yeah,” Sam answers. “Well, me and Carly are, anyway.”

“I’m just an ally!” Cat giggles.

Dice grabs each side of his head, like he’s trying to prevent it from exploding. “Holy shit, no way! This is *wild*!” He points at Cat. “Wait! I remember you almost said something once! I *thought* you were gonna say werewolves but then decided it was just what I’d *expected* to hear!” He shakes his head in awe.

Sam looks askance at Cat. “When did you almost tell Dice we were werewolves?” she asks.

But Cat doesn’t get a chance to answer. “Okay, but *my* question is,” Carly begins, “Do you just know because of Goomer, or are you one, too?”

“Don’t tell them anything, Dice!” Goomer hollers.

“Relax, buddy,” Dice says to him. “Okay.” He sits next to Goomer on the couch. “I guess I owe you an explanation.”

The other three settle onto various pieces of furniture, preparing for a story.

Dice runs a hand through his curly hair. “So, yeah. We’re both werewolves.”

He stops. “That’s *it*?” Sam asks, annoyed.

“Hang on, I’m thinking how to explain everything!” Dice complains. “Okay,” he finally says. “So, you’ve met Goomer’s mom.”

“No,” Carly says matter of factly.

Dice ignores her. “Well, either it was luck, or a werewolf pulling strings in the foster system that matched her with Goomer, but she’s a werewolf, too, so she knew how to raise Goomer to make sure he could keep this a secret. He denied it for *ages* when I started working with him. And at that point, I wasn’t changing myself quite yet, so I couldn’t prove anything to him.”

“Aww,” Sam nudges Cat. “Remember when Dice was still a little baby and he didn’t stink so bad?”

“Will you focus, please?” Dice says irritably. “Once I could change, I was able to convince him that I was a safe person to tell, and he finally admitted it.”

“I didn’t know I could trust you!” Goomer says defensively. He narrows his eyes. “I still don’t know if I can trust you,” he addresses Sam, Cat, and Carly.

“See, the thing is, Goomer’s a *big* wolf.”

“Shocking,” is Carly’s dry aside.

“And it’s not really safe for him to change at home because his apartment is too small. He broke a lot of furniture when he first moved there and would try to change. And *I’m* just not big enough to control him. Also, I can’t drive yet, so even if he *wanted* to go somewhere out in the mountains or whatever, he’d have to leave his car somewhere and risk it getting towed, and I wouldn’t be able to go with him to keep an eye on him, either as a human or a wolf.”

“Couldn’t you ask your mom for a ride?” Cat asks.

Dice shakes his head. “I’m an independent man, and besides, I’m not willing to pay her rates for her chauffeur services.”

Sam is beginning to get an idea about where Dice’s entrepreneurial nature comes from.

“So has Goomer just been taking wolfsbane for every full moon for years?” Sam asks.

“Pretty much,” Dice says regretfully. “I take it most of the time, too, honestly. It’s not much fun just changing with my mom and my Aunt Fergene at home.”

“Understandable,” Carly replies. But then she looks at Sam. Sam looks back at her, then at Cat, who raises her eyebrows.

Sam sighs. “What if we potentially have a solution for you?” she asks.

Which is how that night, they end up taking Dice and Goomer with them to Shadow Creek Park.

On the phone, Tori had sounded excited to have more wolves join them at the park, Jade had just been sarcastic. As they change in the clearing (Dice and Goomer both change where they had Spencer change a few months ago), Tori seems ready to have them join them permanently.

“Okay, we *really* have to find a bigger space,” she tells Carly and Sam.

Maybe because it’s Dice and Goomer, but Sam is resistant. “Why? They’re fine changing out there.”

“But Spencer will be here in a few months,” Carly states. “Maybe Dice and Goomer are fine with treating it like a locker room, but I guarantee Spencer won’t be.”

“We’re about to have six wolves in this area,” Tori says happily. “As *awesome* as that is, if someone comes by...six of us are a lot harder to hide than just a few.”

“No one *ever* comes here,” Sam says definitively. Because that’s been the case for *years* now.

“But what happens when someone does?” Tori asks.

“We eat him?” Sam suggests.

“Sam!” Carly scolds.

But Sam knows that Tori is probably right. Besides, she misses the cover of a forest, like she and Carly had back in Seattle. “Whenever you wanna explore the mountains or whatever, just let me know.”

“Maybe over the summer,” Tori suggests. “I don’t think I’ll have *any* time for the rest of the semester.”

“I get it.”

And maybe Sam is won over by her friends, as annoying as they can be as humans, emerging as the most incongruous pair she could have anticipated.

Goomer is, indeed, a *very* large white wolf. Dice is a much smaller red wolf. But as soon as they all sniff each other, tails start wagging, and the playing begins.

“We’re gonna need some more arms to throw things,” Jade groans as they toss tennis balls and toys for the wolves. Goomer is so fast he almost always reaches things first, and Sam gets an idea of how he broke the furniture in his house as he bowls her over, multiple times, without even seeming to realize he’s doing it.

“Maybe Andre would want to come throw things with us!” Cat suggests.

“That’s not a bad idea,” Jade admits.

Sam glances over at Tori.

Yeah, they’re going to need a new location with more cover, and soon.

## **April 2016**

“Are you *sure* Trina won’t find out?” Andre asks.

“Nope,” Tori replies. “There’s actually a pretty good chance she’ll smell us on you.”

Andre sighs. “I don’t know why I keep asking. You’re not offering me any comfort.”



“Because there *is* none.” She points to her nose. “It’s pretty sensitive.”

“We’ll spray some car air freshener and drive with all the windows down the whole way home,” Jade suggests carelessly.

“That might work,” Tori admits. She glances up at the sky. “Okay, we’d better go in,” she tells Carly.

“See you in a minute!” Carly tells Cat, Jade, and Andre (though Cat is the only one she kisses goodbye).

It’s Friday night, the second night of the full moon, and it’s the first time Tori hasn’t changed with Sam at Shadow Creek Park in years. It’s kind of weird to be walking back into the woods with just Carly. But they just couldn’t work out a schedule, especially with the addition of Dice and Goomer to their park roster. With Spencer moving to Los Angeles in a few weeks, it’s only going to get harder to manage the schedule.

Tomorrow night, Tori and Carly, as well as Jade, are all working on a film project headed up by Jade’s friend film school friend Chandra (which is part of why the full moon was not taken into account with regard to scheduling). But tonight, Sam and Dice are both moving some kind of unspecified “merchandise” and can’t make it to the park. Tori doesn’t understand quite what they do, but she at least understands it’s important.

Cat will be going to the park on both nights, because she “can’t choose” between her girlfriends, though she’s already expressed concern about being able to go twice a month if the full moon doesn’t fall on a weekend. And Andre had come at Cat’s invitation, because he’d had such a good time when he and Trina had come to the park so Trina could let everyone else prove to her boyfriend that werewolves exist.

“It’s weird to do this without Sam,” Carly comments, echoing Tori’s thoughts. None of them have been thrilled about the idea of attending the park on different nights, but they’ve all accepted a long time ago that it will probably happen eventually. Tori expects that future months might end up being just her and Jade, and then Carly, Sam, and everyone else. Which makes her feel a little sad, but at the same time, this started with just her and Jade.

“Yeah,” Tori says wistfully. “I think things are just going to be weird in general senior year.”

“Probably,” Carly agrees. “It’s not as long of a drive for you, but Cat has been looking for a closer location for us to go to in a pinch. There’s nothing that feels nearly so secluded and safe as here, but...” Carly shrugs. “We have to make the best of our situation.”

That just makes Tori feel sadder. “I just hope this isn’t the beginning of the end of an era.”

“I don’t think so,” Carly replies. “Besides, then that just means we have a new era opening up.”

“Like maybe we’ll find some miraculously deserted public land in the woods that we can change in as a large group and not be bothered?” Tori sighs. “I wish.”

“It’s still possible.”

“It’s unlikely.”

“True.” But Carly clearly isn’t satisfied leaving things so pessimistic. “We’ll find something. Maybe the perfect location is a little bit further away and it will have to be something we do every couple of months instead, but it will be even more special, because it’ll be more rare.”

“Maybe,” Tori agrees. “There are all sorts of rental cabins in the mountains. We’d have to spend some money, but...”

“With a big group of us, it wouldn’t be so bad.”

“I guess we just have to finish school so we can start *making* money,” Tori adds.

“We’re almost there.”

But that’s about the end of the conversation as the power of the moon overtakes them, and they get lost in the joy of being animals for a night.

Andre is *especially* delighted by their antics, and Tori enjoys the opportunity to spend time with one of her closest friends in a new way. Even if that new way is just him throwing dog toys for her, there’s a different sort of closeness that develops between a werewolf and a human. Tori has seen it happen in so many ways, she can see it in Andre’s eyes as, finally, he begins to be able to easily spot the difference between herself and Carly, as he loses the barrier of hesitation between them and allows himself to pet them. He seems to be unable to stop marveling at the situation, like even the awareness over the past six months or so doesn’t compare to actually spending time with these werewolves.

Tori is truthfully a little sad for him. How disappointing to be dating a werewolf who never changes, who you can never see as their most playful, primal self, who will never cuddle you and keep you warm with their thick fur?

Though she’s legitimately concerned that Trina will realize Andre has gone to spend time with the werewolves, when she doesn’t hear anything about it for the next few days, she figures that either Andre hid his tracks well enough, or Trina really doesn’t care.

Though the latter seems doubtful, so maybe Trina is just keeping her knowledge close to the vest, to pull out during some kind of argument.

Sometimes, she really doesn’t know how Andre makes it work with her sister.

Actually, it’s *all* the time.

## **June 2016**

Beck knows a lot of this comes down to luck. The luck to be born with a pretty face. The luck to have parents who encouraged him to cultivate his interest in acting, plus the finances to

send him to performing arts school. The luck to catch the attention of a casting director. The luck to be cast onto a show that hits certain parts of the cultural zeitgeist that leads to it getting a lot of attention. The luck to be given a role that people want to see more of. *Luck, luck, luck*. Sure, he's worked hard to get as far as he has, but he knows that actually has *very* little to do with his success.

Which makes it even more difficult to know how to respond when success just keeps wanting to knock on his door.

He's starting to get more offers. Movie roles, the lead role on a different TV show. They're not *pouring* in, but enough people have approached him and his management team that he's starting to seriously consider whether it's soon going to be time to step back from the show he's on, which is about to start filming its third season, and move on to something else.

He's locked in for the third season, though. But if he wants it to be his last, he should probably say something soon. He also knows third seasons are often when a show really hits its stride, and sometimes when a show peaks. What if the third season is really good? Would that make him want to stick around for a fourth season?

Maybe he should push for the dramatic death of his character as an exit. He's always wanted a good death scene.

But with the idea of success (and possibly *more* success) comes the thought that...maybe it's time to move.

The trailer in his parents' driveway has served him well for a long time. It may not have electricity or running water, but hey, that's what the poolhouse is for. But he's appreciated the privacy and independence his trailer has offered. And, though it's something he likes more in the abstract than in practice, he likes that he has a home he can just take with him when he goes somewhere.

His living situation has lent him some kind of bohemian charm in interviews, letting him be the guy who lives simply, the lone wolf with a certain cool guy aesthetic. But he can't live in his parents' driveway forever, can he?

Maybe it's as simple as taking his trailer somewhere else. Finding his own plot of land somewhere. That would be pretty cool, actually.

But, he's not there yet. As silly as it is, he wants one more summer with his friends, where his trailer is the "party trailer." By the end of the month, they'll all be twenty-one, so it's not even really about a place to party that's safe in a legal sense. Beck just likes living in the place everyone likes to gather. Even if it's a little too small sometimes, especially when Robbie and Freddie are down from Stanford.

Things with Robbie are going...okay. Beck really doesn't love the idea of an open relationship. He had suggested it because it felt like the only way to have Robbie back in his life and besides, it's apparently common among gay men, so maybe he should just find a way to get used to it. Just the idea of sex with someone else doesn't bother him quite as much as

the fact that Robbie evidently has some kind of feelings for the guy he's been fooling around with at college. Otherwise, why wouldn't he just drop a fuckbuddy in favor of a boyfriend?

It's Freddie. It *has* to be Freddie. Beck had always assumed Freddie is straight, but now he's looking back on everything, on all their interactions, on all his interactions with Robbie, and he's starting to doubt that. Even when they came to visit Los Angeles last month for the week between the spring semester ending and Robbie's summer semester beginning, Beck had scrutinized them heavily, trying to ascertain their relationship. They'd been *very* covert, to the point that he'd begun to wonder if he was wrong about his assumption.

But when it comes down to it, it *has* to be Freddie. He can't even conceive of it being anyone else. Who else does Robbie even talk about from school?

They've both been trying to figure out what they're comfortable with in their open relationship. Robbie prefers if Beck *doesn't* tell him about his hookups, which Beck understands, so he keeps that private. But Beck would ideally like to know more details about Robbie's lover. He doesn't need to know *everything*, but he would kind of like to know who he is.

But Robbie won't tell him. That's his own stipulation for this open relationship. He'll be honest about anything else Beck wants to know (which is typically Beck trying to ascertain what kinds of feelings Robbie has for him without directly asking him), but his lover's identity stays secret.

It's working okay for now, but Beck can't help but wonder how long this balancing act can last.

## **July 2016**

It's the summer before the last year of college, and it feels like big changes and big decisions should start to be made.

But for Sinjin, most things still feel about the same.

It's time to look toward the future, figure out what comes next, where he can get work or internships. It's time to make decisions like, does he want to stay in the Los Angeles area? Probably. His parents aren't paying for him to attend a small private arts college for an animation degree for him not to work in the film industry. He'd like to put some physical distance between himself and his immediate family, but the work he wants is in LA, and besides, LA is his home.

Or, maybe it's not such a pressing, immediate time to make decisions. Burf seems content to see where things go, but he's always been the more laid-back one between them. His schooling will set him up for a job in the film industry, too, so at least they will probably be able to stay together.

And then there's Trina. Trina actually graduated in the spring, but she seems pretty unconcerned about the future, herself. "I'm just waiting for the right opportunity," she tells Sinjin, when he asks whether she thinks she'll still be living with him for a while. "I need to find the right sorts of people who can recognize how great I am."

Sinjin is sure those people exist somewhere, or if they don't, that Trina can force them into existence with the sheer force of her will. It's not a word he would have used for her in high school, but as she's mellowed out, she's become much more charismatic. If half of the game is being able to sell yourself, Trina won't be unemployed for long.

But, she's assured him that she's staying put for the foreseeable future. "Don't you worry!" She ruffles his curly hair. "I'm not leaving you to face your rubber factory dad alone!"

He appreciates it, deeply. But, he supposes the free rent he gives her in exchange for pretending to have a girlfriend benefits them both.

It's not that Sinjin is in the closet, exactly. It's difficult to explain. It's just that Burf is his best friend, and the most important person in the world to him. Sinjin doesn't know precisely how his parents feel about queer people, but he knows they're fairly conservative, he knows they wish he and his sister were both less weird. Even if Sinjin doesn't feel very queer (in the sexuality sense; he knows he's plenty weird) aside from his closeness with Burf, he also can't imagine there's any way his parents would understand that he wants to make his life plans in conjunction with Burf, that they intend to live together for the rest of their lives, that they make each other happy. Even if Sinjin were to get an *actual* girlfriend (which, yes, please, he'd really like that someday), she'd have to be okay with his commitment to his best friend.

How do you explain to your parents that your best friend is your life partner? Especially if you can't even use words like "we're in love." Sinjin and Burf love each other, they both know that, but they also know just as well that it isn't the type of love most people build their lives around.

They'd never understand. They would see him as gay, and that would be that. It may be pretty frowned upon to kick gay minors out of the house (though Sinjin knows it still happens), but conveniently forgetting to pay rent on his apartment or for his tuition? That's easier to withdraw, and Sinjin would be in a lot of trouble if it happened.

So, Trina has been the solution to a conversation that might get Sinjin cut off from his family. She's attractive, she's charming, and next to Sinjin, she looks almost normal. Basically, she's the perfect cover.

Keeping Trina happy and stable and present in their lives is about more than just Sinjin's cover story, though. He and Burf actually both *like* her. She fascinates them (not just because she's a human female, but because she's *Trina*), but more than that, they enjoy her company. She's funny, she's encouraging, and though she's never done so much as a single chore around the apartment, she doesn't leave a path of destruction in her wake, either.

Sinjin suspects all of these traits are improvements since high school.

On this particular evening, he and Burf are playing video games in the living room while Trina loudly sings in the bathroom (another shocking discovery: Trina *can* actually sing as long as she thinks no one is listening) as she gets ready for her evening.

“What are you up to tonight?” Sinjin asks her as she emerges from the bathroom in a short, low-cut dress. By now, they’re both polite enough not to stare anymore. It had felt a bit like living with an alien for a while, living with a hot girl.

“Andre’s picking me up,” she replies. “We’re going to the movies. He really wants to see *Ghostbusters* for some reason.” She rolls her eyes.

“I get it,” Burf nods. “I want to see it, too.” He takes a big bite out of a cucumber.

“I let him get his way sometimes,” Trina concedes. “That way, he’ll owe me.”

“Sounds very healthy,” Sinjin replies, meaning it.

Trina doesn’t take it that way and shoots him a glare. Her eyes flash in a way that makes his stomach drop. For a moment, he feels as though he’s about to be ripped to shreds.

Then, Trina groans abruptly.

“What’s wrong?” Burf asks, sounding unconcerned.

“Just feeling wei—oh, no. Oh, god.” She’s doubled over all of a sudden, and looks like she’s shaking, and she lurches into her bedroom suddenly.

“Is she sick?” Sinjin wonders, putting down his controller and starting to get up cautiously.

“I don’t know,” Burf replies, sounding worried now.

“She didn’t go into the bathroom,” Sinjin notes. He hesitates, then knocks on Trina’s door. “You okay?” he calls.

“Go away!” she snarls in a gruff tone that hardly sounds like her voice. It hardly sounds *human*.

Sinjin turns horrified eyes to Burf. He glances out the window at the darkening sky. “Did you —” he begins.

“Of course I did,” Burf scoffs, but then his eyes shift from side to side, growing more horrified by the moment. “Unless I...oh, no.”

“Burf,” Sinjin intones quietly. “What have you done?”

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He fucked up. Oh, god, he fucked up. He and Sinjin stand frozen outside of Trina’s room, staring at each other.

He can't understand it. He's always *so* careful. It's part of his nature; he's a person who has always had to be careful about what he eats, what he says, how he appears in the world. It makes him someone who is much more comfortable working in the background, paying attention to small details and handling minutia.

*How* could he have messed this up so *spectacularly*?

But before he can offer any excuse or explanation, there's a knock at the door.

Sinjin's face turns white. "*Andre*," he hisses.

"Oh, god, what do we do?" Burf asks.

"Don't let him in," Sinjin advises.

Burf lunges across the room to hold the door closed, locking it as he leans against it. "Um, Trina's not ready," he calls through the door. He hates to lie to Andre. He'd always thought Andre was *so* cool when they were in high school, and has enjoyed actually getting to know him better since he's been dating Trina. Burf feels, for a moment, torn between pleasing the popular guy, and doing what he *knows* is the right thing to do. Has he really changed much since high school?

Andre chuckles. "Come on, tell her not to be so modest, I'm sure she looks great." He tries the handle; Burf can feel the doorknob resist him. "Did you lock me out?" Andre asks, confused.

"Yeah, she's...really serious about not being ready," Burf answers, shooting Sinjin a panicked look. Sinjin looks back in equal distress. Like him, he knows Sinjin also admires Andre. This isn't fun for either of them.

"She's really gonna make me wait out here?" Andre sounds unhappy. "Well, okay, I guess," he grumbles.

"What now?" Burf hisses as he moves back toward Sinjin.

"I got her phone off the bathroom counter," Sinjin replies. "I'll call Tori. She'll know what to do."

"I hope so," gulps Burf.

He's standing so close to Sinjin that he can hear the sound of the phone ringing, then Tori's voice in the receiver, sounding confused. "Trina? What is it?"

"Tori, it's actually me, Sinjin," Sinjin replies.

"Sinjin?" Tori sounds a little confused. "Why are you calling me on Trina's phone?"

"It's really important—" but Sinjin gets cut off.

"Oh, no!" Jade yells. "Tori, hang up on him."

“But what if it—”

“Are you forgetting that he *stalked* me?” Jade shoots back.

There’s a beat of silence, then the line goes dead.

“*Damn it*,” Sinjin curses.

“Maybe I should have talked,” Burf frowns.

“You’re probably right,” Sinjin admits. He stomps his foot. “I never should have tried to wrangle Jade’s phone number out of that *iCarly* girl.”

“I told you,” Burf reminds him. Sinjin tends to be both idealistic and Machiavellian at times, which can be a risky combination, but Burf has always liked the fact that it makes Sinjin occasionally so *brave*. Foolish, but unafraid. Still, they have more pressing matters. He looks toward the door. “Maybe we need Andre to call them.”

“I think it’s our only shot,” Sinjin admits. They move closer to Trina’s door, through which they can hear only whimpering. Burf winces.

“Okay,” he mutters. He goes to the front door. “Um, Andre?” he calls through.

“Yeah?” Andre answers, obviously irritated.

“Trina needs you to, um. Call Tori.”

“Call Tori?” Andre replies, sounding bewildered. “Why can’t she call her?”

“She, um. Dropped her phone in the toilet.”

“Oh. No wonder she didn’t answer when I texted her that I was here.” But then, “What am I supposed to tell Tori?”

“To get here as soon as possible,” Burf answers grimly.

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“I still think we should’ve seen what he wanted,” Tori grumbles from the passenger seat.

“I have a zero tolerance policy for stalkers,” Jade replies evenly. She thinks this is a *very* reasonable position. Tori had tried explaining to her months ago about how Trina is now friends with Sinjin, who’s sort-of boyfriends with Burf, and how Sinjin wants to get closer to Jade because he admires her work and not for any creepy reasons. But Jade has been dodging Sinjin’s advances for years now. She’s not interested in finding out if he’s changed.

She thought Tori understood that.

This was supposed to be a nice date for them. They’d gone to the Valley because there’s a great used bookstore that has a lot of film history books and screenplays crammed onto its



shelves, and Jade has some early birthday money to spend. Then, because they'd been in there browsing for so long, they'd grabbed dinner, and now are just about to start heading home to enjoy Tori's wolfsbane-infused libido.

Except, this weird incident with Sinjin's call seems to have put a damper on Tori's enthusiasm. Jade doesn't know how to fix it.

But then Tori's phone is buzzing again. Jade groans, "What *now*."

"It's Andre," Tori informs her uncertainly. This time when she answers, she doesn't put it on speaker phone. "Hello?"

Jade rolls her eyes and struggles to hear Andre on Tori's phone. She can really only get a sense of his tone, which doesn't tell her much. All she can tell is he doesn't sound urgent.

"You want us to—but you don't know why? Okay..." she drawls. "But you think it's important? Well, geez, okay, we're on our way. Text me Trina's address."

"What do you mean we're on our way?" Jade asks. Tori shushes her.

"Right. We won't be long. See you in a bit."

"I'm not going anywhere near Sinjin," Jade says stubbornly.

"I already told Andre we're on our way," Tori replies in an annoyed tone.

Jade doesn't like that this is ruining their evening. They'd been having a perfectly nice time, buying books and eating tacos. They were supposed to end the evening by going home and eating— "Okay, but *why* are we on our way? All I can see is that Sinjin is being his slippery self, as usual."

"Jade, did you ever stop to think that this *might not be about you*?" Tori says severely.

"Andre says he's locked out of Trina's apartment, Sinjin and Burf are telling him that they need our help because something has to be going on with Trina. I don't know. So maybe let's just *go there*?"

"Okay, but I'm staying in the car."

"Fine." Tori stares at her phone, seeming to be seething. "Turn right up here."

Jade sighs heavily and it turns into a groan at the end, but she follows Tori's directions. Where they had dinner is actually not that far from Trina's apartment, apparently, because it takes them less than ten minutes to get there. Jade finds street parking and puts the car in park, folding her arms. "How long are you going to be?" she asks.

"How should I know?" Tori asks incredulously.

Jade grinds her teeth in exasperation. Probably Trina is just having some kind of crisis because she broke a nail or something stupid and Andre is just overreacting. That has to be it. Or maybe Trina is injured somehow? That could be interesting. Jade wars with the possibility

of seeing Trina bleeding with the certainty of seeing Sinjin. She also probably isn't going to win many girlfriend points by letting Tori walk into an unknown situation alone. "Fine. I'm coming with you."

"Fine," Tori agrees.

As they approach the building, Andre meets them, holding the door open. "Good, you made it," he comments.

"What's going on?" Tori asks.

Andre shrugs. "I have no idea. No one will let me in and I haven't been able to talk to Trina. Burf said she dropped her phone in the toilet."

Tori frowns. "When? Because Sinjin called me on her phone before you called me."

Andre looks confused. "I don't know. Like, right before I called? That doesn't sound right."

"Who knows?" Jade interrupts. "Let's just find out what's happening so Tori and I can go home."

Andre nods grimly and leads them to the apartment, then steps back to invite Tori to knock on the door.

"Trina?" Tori calls as she knocks.

"Oh, good, you're here," Sinjin's voice comes through the door, sounding agitated. The door unlocks and Sinjin peers out from a slight crack. "Tori, you can come in," he states.

"This is ridiculous," Andre mutters, and reaches a hand forward to push against the door.

"Burf, help!" Sinjin calls anxiously, but it's too late, he can't hold the door closed as Andre pushes his way in. Jade hesitates, but follows.

She's surprised to see a fairly normal-looking apartment, tasteful with touches of weirdness here and there. She had the impression that this was largely Sinjin and Burf's place, and Trina just rented a room. Could they possibly be this normal?

"Trina!" Andre hollers. Impatiently, he strides over to the door that must be her bedroom and knocks. "Trina?" he asks in a more normal tone, pressing his ear to the door. He either doesn't like what he hears, or doesn't hear anything, because he frowns and tries the door. Locked.

"I wouldn't go in there," Burf warns.

"How do you unlock this door?" Andre demands.

"Trina only wants Tori to go in," Sinjin replies.

"Why?" Tori asks, bewildered. "What does she want with me?"

“She can’t say,” Burf replies.

“Stand back,” Tori tells Andre, who holds his hands up in defeat and backs away several steps, arms crossed over his chest. “Hey, Trina, it’s me!” Tori calls. “Let me in?” When nothing happens, Tori tries the door herself, then, clearly aggravated, she tries to force the door, yanking and banging on it.

Jade lets out a heavy sigh. “Amateurs. Move over.” She pulls a pair of nail scissors out of her purse. Not the most effective lockpicking tool, but Jade has practice. And especially on the simple locks typically used on apartment doors, it’s a pretty simple maneuver.

“Since when can you—” Tori seems astonished, then shakes her head. “I don’t want to know.”

“Remember, only Tori,” Sinjin stresses as Tori tries the knob.

“Whatever,” Andre grumbles. “We’re gonna miss our movie, but whatever.”

Jade moves to stand next to him, signifying that she’ll let Tori go in alone. “There, there,” she pats his arm. “Trina’s crazy was bound to catch up with her.”

Andre glares, and Jade takes sadistic delight in his reaction. Everything else about this situation is stupid and annoying, she might as well get her kicks where she can, while hopefully Tori resolves this quickly so that maybe they can still salvage a part of their night.

Tori slips into the room, closing the door firmly behind her. Jade does her best to ignore Sinjin and Burf.

“Hello, Jade,” Sinjin finally murmurs.

“Don’t,” she growls at him.

Andre gazes at her in confusion. “What’s your problem with Sinjin?” he asks.

Jade laughs harshly. “What *isn’t* my problem with Sinjin? He’s *Sinjin*.”

“Yeah, he’s a good guy,” Andre replies.

“Maybe if you’re not a girl he’s *stalking*, sure.”

“I apologize for my past behavior,” Sinjin says sincerely. “I had a huge crush on you in high school, but I’m over it now.”

“Sure,” Jade drawls. “Whatever.”

“I really enjoyed working with you on your short film years ago,” Sinjin tells her earnestly. Jade doesn’t reply. “My interest in you at this point is purely professional. I’d be honored to work with you again.” Jade still doesn’t answer. Sinjin appears to droop and backs away toward Burf.

Burf pats his shoulder. “Shake it off,” he advises. “You shot your shot.”

“Yeah, I guess,” Sinjin murmurs wistfully.

Tori pokes her head out of Trina’s door. “Jade? Can you come in for a moment?”

Sinjin stiffens. “Are you *sure*?” he asks Tori.

“Yes, I need her,” Tori replies firmly.

Jade shoots a smirk at the men in the room and follows Tori into Trina’s room. It’s dark. Jade looks around and doesn’t see Trina anywhere. “What’s going on?” she asks Tori.

Tori shushes her, then walks quietly over to Trina’s closet, where the door is ajar. She gives Jade a warning look, then opens the closet door.

There’s a gray wolf hunched in Trina’s closet, pushed as far back into a corner as possible, whimpering softly, with some kind of red garment around its midsection.

It takes Jade a moment to even understand that it *is* Trina. The idea of Trina changing seems so *foreign*, so *impossible*, that it doesn’t even cross her mind at first. Trina doesn’t change. Trina *hasn’t* changed in *years*. Trina must be pumped full of so much wolfsbane that she probably couldn’t change if she *wanted* to. These are truths Jade has absorbed over the years she’s known about Tori’s family’s lycanthropy, and yet, here is counterproof to all of these supposed “facts.”

Trina Vega is a werewolf, just like all the other Vegas, and she has changed under the full moon. Though, she clearly *didn’t* mean to, judging by her obvious distress.

“I don’t know what to *do*,” Tori hisses.

Jade fails to see how this is their problem. “We could just do nothing? She’s a big girl, she should know what to do when this happens.”

“It’s been a *long time*.”

Jade rolls her eyes. “Spencer hadn’t changed in over a decade when Carly took him to that park that first time, and he was fine.”

“He was fine because he had *support*. If I’d changed tonight, maybe I could offer her some companionship, but—” Tori gestures helplessly.

Jade stares at the broken werewolf hunched in her own closet. “Does she even know we’re here?” she wonders. The consistent whimpering makes her wonder if Trina’s dissociating or something.

In response, Trina growls.

“I guess that’s a yes,” Jade comments.

“Hey, Trina? Hey,” Tori says, crouching down next to her. “Hey, we’re here to help,” she tells her softly.

Trina lifts her head. It’s amazing how clearly her narrowed eyes read as a glower. “I don’t think she wants our help. Let’s go, Tori,” Jade replies.

Tori doesn’t move. “Can you at least let me help you get that dress off you?”

Jade makes a disgusted sound. Trina growls. She doesn’t move. Tori sighs and gets to her feet, then leaves the bedroom. Jade follows, because she has no interest in being left alone with Trina even when she’s in human form.

“Okay,” Tori addresses Sinjin and Burf. “What happened?”

“Umm,” Sinjin glances at Andre uncertainly.

“He knows,” Tori says curtly. “And it seems obvious that you two do, too. We’re all in the loop here that Trina and I are werewolves,” she clarifies.

“Wait a minute, why do *you* two know?” Andre asks, looking suspiciously at Sinjin and Burf. “She told me she’d never told you, because she was never gonna change around you, anyway.”

Tori seems to consider this an interesting question. She raises her eyebrows and looks expectantly at the other two guys.

Jade thinks she has the answer. “Because they’re stalker creeps,” she supplies.

“We don’t *mean* to be,” Burf replies weakly. He looks helplessly at Sinjin.

Who sighs, and admits. “She never told us. We figured it out on our own.”

“*How?*” Tori asks incredulously.

Here, Sinjin looks expectantly at Burf. Burf looks anxious and guilty as he says. “So...I’m not a werewolf, but my dad is.”

“Wait, *really?*” Andre asks, surprised.

“Yeah, better start using condoms, you *can* get a werewolf pregnant,” Jade snarks.

Andre looks offended. “Not that it’s any of your business, but—”

“I don’t need to hear this!” Tori shouts, glaring at both Jade and Andre. She turns her attention back to Burf. “So your dad’s a werewolf.”

“Right,” Burf nods. “So I know what wolfsbane looks like. When I saw her taking it every day, I remembered my cousin talking about this ‘special case’ that she sells to that’s a little off the deep end because she takes too much. So, I,” he hesitates, like he knows he’s about to say something controversial. “I started replacing her wolfsbane with placebos. Except on the

actual nights of the full moon.” His shoulders slump. “I must’ve accidentally switched out the real thing for a placebo tonight.”

Well. Jade doesn’t think that seems controversial at all. Especially when Sinjin adds earnestly, but also is clearly defending Burf, “Taking it less *really* seems to help her. She keeps talking about how she’s never felt better.”

“How long ago was this?” Andre asks faintly.

“Not too long after she moved in with us,” Burf replies. “But I think it took some time for her body to process all the excess wolfsbane in her system.”

Jade sees the way Tori and Andre share a significant look.

“So *that’s* why she seemed so different,” Andre says in awe.

“I think you might owe your entire relationship to Burf,” Tori tells him. She turns back to Burf. “Why didn’t you *say* something to her?”

“Because it wasn’t our business,” Sinjin replies.

“So it was your business when you switched her medication around, but not when it came to talking to her about it?” Jade challenges. Sure, she’s pro-anything that makes Trina more tolerable to be around, but she isn’t about to let two creeps off the hook.

“I know we should’ve,” Burf says in a conflicted voice. “But we didn’t want her to switch back. At least, not while she was living with us. We were going to tell her before she moved out.”

“That’s...*incredibly* shady,” Tori tells them. “But I get it. Trina is *not* easy to live with.”

“She’s really not bad,” Sinjin insists. “At least once she was taking the proper wolfsbane dosage.”

“It’s still not great for her that she never changes, at least, according to my dad,” Burf says.

“Your dad’s not wrong,” Tori agrees. She looks between the three guys, then zeros in on Burf. “You have to tell her. She’s probably confused and horrified if she thinks she’s been taking wolfsbane every day for the past ten years.”

“You’re right,” Burf nods.

Tori leads the two guys into Trina’s room. Jade follows, fascinated, but Tori doesn’t let Andre into the room.

“*Really?*” Andre asks, offended, as Tori shuts him out.

“Hey, Trina,” Tori says. “I brought Sinjin and Burf.”

Immediately, Jade can hear panicked scrabbling from the inside of the closet. Trina is clearly not happy with this.

“Don’t worry,” Tori assures her. “They know that you’re a werewolf.” Trina emits a brief, pained yelp in response. “Here, I won’t even let them over to look at you. They just want to say something.”

“Trina,” Sinjin starts. “Um, we’re really sorry.” But then he doesn’t seem to know what to say, so he looks over at Burf.

“We figured out you’re a werewolf because my dad is one and I recognized your wolfsbane,” he tells her. “And...I’ve been switching out your wolfsbane for a placebo so you weren’t taking it every day and I think I accidentally messed it up today...”

“It’s why you’ve been feeling so much better lately,” Sinjin adds quickly, like he’s trying to make this sound like a good thing.

But Trina clearly does not find this to be reassuring, because a low growl emits from the closet.

Jade feels the hair on her neck stand up. The growling gets louder. Tori stands in front of all of them like some kind of brave, sexy idiot, widening her stance and spreading her arms protectively. “Maybe you’d all better leave,” she says quietly.

“Yep,” Sinjin gulps, pushing his way through the door immediately, Burf at his heels.

Jade hesitates. Does she really want to leave Tori alone with an angry werewolf? Tori backs toward the door herself, nudging Jade to go through, and Jade does so, relieved when Tori follows her through and closes the door to Trina’s room, muffling the sounds of the furious barks and growls emanating from the closet.

“You really want to be *that*?” Sinjin asks Burf incredulously.

“Of course I do,” Burf replies.

Tori frowns. “What do you mean?” she asks them, though most of her attention is on Trina’s door, as if she’s concerned her angry sister is going to break it down.

“I know about werewolves because we’ve been trying to find a way for Burf to transform since high school,” Sinjin informs her.

Tori frowns. “But...he can’t. You either are one or you’re not.”

“Probably,” Burf admits. “But I’m half werewolf. And the existence of wolfsbane suggests the interesting possibility that there’s another herb or substance in nature that might help *me* access the side of my genealogy that *is* a lycanthrope.”

“We’re hoping to discover a way for him to access his birthright,” Sinjin adds loftily.

Jade snorts. She can't help it. Sinjin actually looks upset. Huh. She can insult and degrade him in every way (and she *has*), but clearly it matters to him that Burf gets what he wants. *Interesting*.

"Well, good luck to you, I guess," Tori says skeptically.

"So what do we do now?" Sinjin asks.

Tori looks taken aback. "How should I know? I'm not a botanist."

"No, I mean with Trina."

Tori shrugs. "Wait until morning and see if she even wants to be around you guys anymore?" she suggests.

"You can't leave us alone with her!"

Jade smirks. "Seems to me if she rips you to shreds, you've earned it."

"We were *helping* her!" Sinjin groans.

"Then maybe you should have been honest with her." Tori folds her arms.

"She wouldn't hurt us," Burf says confidently. "Werewolves don't become homicidal."

A particularly loud snarl rips through the air. Burf looks much less confident.

But then Jade realizes something, "Wait a minute, where's Andre?"

Tori looks white. "Oh, *shit*!" She lunges for Trina's door. Jade is right behind her.

And there's Andre, in Trina's room, crouched next to her closet, covered in blo—

Oh, wait. He's holding her red dress in his hands. Well, that's a lot less interesting.

Trina is snarling and whining and is *clearly* distressed at his presence. Andre seems to be taking it in stride. "There," he says calmly, folding the dress and placing it next to him. "You look so *gorgeous* in this dress, I know you'd be upset if you'd ripped it."

Another whimpering growl. Andre faces her, unafraid, even looking a little amused.

"Hey, it's *okay*," Andre assures her. "I'm not seeing anything I haven't seen before. I mean, as far as werewolves go. Sure, it's new for you, but." He shrugs. "I think you look great."

It's clearly the wrong thing to say. Trina fully howls in misery and distress. Tori winces at the sound. Behind her, Jade can hear Sinjin murmuring that he hopes no neighbors come knocking.

"Well," Andre says, sitting down comfortably on the floor. "Sounds like there's nothing for you to do but wait this out. Mind if I hang out with you?"



A deep, guttural growl is his answer.

“Well, too bad, I’m going to hang out, anyway,” he says. “I’m not going to leave you alone when you’re this upset over something that isn’t even a big deal.”

Another misstep. Trina snarls. The kind that makes Tori shift into a protective stance and take half a step toward Andre.

He holds a hand out toward her, stopping her. “I’m fine,” he assures everyone. “Leave us alone for now, okay?”

Reluctantly, Tori backs out of Trina’s room, taking everyone with her. She looks troubled. “Okay, I *really* don’t think Trina would hurt Andre, but...maybe I should stay here, to be sure.”

“You’ve *got* to be kidding me,” Jade deadpans.

Tori shrugs. She’s clearly not thrilled about the idea, but she feels some sort of pull of loyalty, whether to Andre or her sister or both, Jade isn’t sure. “It also might be good for me to be here when she changes back,” she suggests.

Jade fumes. Well, this ruins her plans for the night. She should just go. There’s no way she wants to stay at Sinjin and Burf’s apartment.

But, on the other hand, if Trina murders them tonight, she definitely wants to witness it.

Jade turns and glares at Sinjin and Burf. “We get your bed,” she demands, then considers the prospect with a mild shudder. “After you change the sheets.”

“If you want, I guess,” Sinjin says hesitantly. “Burf and I sleep on twin beds,” he explains.

Jade groans in annoyance. “*Fine*, whatever, we’ll stay on the couch.”

Tori smiles at her, just slightly, to show how grateful she is. Jade is still pissed, but she isn’t going to leave Tori to handle this alone.

“Let us know what else we can do to make your stay more comfortable,” Burf says formally.

“I have a list of things you’ll have to go buy for us,” Jade reports, already starting a note in her phone. *Toothbrush, toothpaste* (no way is she sharing *anyone’s* in this apartment), *face wash, a face towel*. She pauses, and eyes them both. “And, if Trina kills you, you’re required to have her do it in front of me.”

-

Tori wakes up around dawn to Trina shrieking, “I’m going to *kill you!*”

With reflexes that surprise even her, she kicks the blankets off of her feet (kicking Jade in the process, who roars “*Tori!*” as she wakes up) and launches over the back of the couch to

intercept Trina as she hurtles from her bedroom toward Sinjin and Burf's. She lands much more steadily than she has any right to, considering her head is still foggy from sleep.

"Hey, whoa, Trina, hold up!" she shouts, grabbing ahold of her sister. Oh, geez, Trina is *absolutely* naked, with a blanket hastily wrapped around herself, and it's not covering much anymore. Tori cringes and keeps her eyes focused on Trina's face.

"Are you kidding me right now?" Trina screams. "I'm going to *kill* those little weasel-faced bastards!"

From the couch, Jade laughs, just once, then resumes pretending to be asleep.

"Okay, you *really* know you can't murder people, right?" Tori asks her nervously.

"They *fucked with my pills*, Tori!"

"Which I agree is very bad," Tori continues, calmly and rationally. "But..." She twists her face into something she hopes resembles concern. "Was it *all* bad?" she asks Trina.

"I don't care!" Trina yells.

Behind Trina, Andre is coming out of her bedroom in boxers and an undershirt, looking sleep-rumpled and concerned. Tori catches his eye, hoping for some backup.

"Hey, Trine, why don't you come back to bed?" he says sleepily.

Tori can almost *feel* Trina soften. Which feels like the strongest evidence she's seen so far of how deeply her best friend and her sister are into each other. *Oh, god*. But Trina remains adamant. "I need to *see* these worms cower before me if I'm ever going to sleep *again*!" she announces.

This seems to interest Jade, who sits up. "Well, I'm sure the worms are awake, the whole apartment complex must be," she says sourly. "Worms! Show yourselves!"

Slowly, the door to Sinjin and Burf's bedroom opens, and their faces appear in the crack, one above the other. "We're so sorry, Trina," Sinjin says sadly.

Trina *glowers*. "You call *that* cowering?!" she challenges in a near-shriek. Tori winces. She really hopes no neighbors call the police for a noise complaint. It's not something they need to explain to their dad.

"We regret everything," Burf adds plaintively.

"I don't *believe* you," Trina says harshly. "You did this to make things easier for *you*!"

"No, we didn't!" Sinjin says earnestly. "We were trying to help you!"

"You were slowly poisoning yourself!" Burf adds.

Trina just fumes at them, arms crossed (which at least mostly covers her bare breasts), saying nothing. Sinjin and Burf exchange a look.

Sinjin pushes open the door and falls to his knees. “We’re sorry!” he begs.

Burf falls to the ground next to him, crawling toward Trina, head low, the way a wolf might signify surrender. “I never should have violated your privacy!”

Sinjin clasps his hands in front of him beseechingly. “We were only trying to help!”

“And we didn’t want to talk to you about it because you’re scary!” Burf adds.

“Because you’re a girl!” Sinjin provides context.

Trina laughs in a way that absolutely drives home how scary she is. “Oh ho ho, you haven’t even *seen* scary,” she threatens them, taking a step toward them. They cringe, Tori grabs Trina’s shoulder to keep her from moving any closer.

“We’re sorry!” Sinjin blubbers.

“Please don’t hurt us!” Burf begs.

“Trina, don’t hurt ‘em, they meant well,” Andre says tiredly.

“Do you not *understand*—”

“I understand why you’re upset and I don’t think it’s okay that they did this without talking to you,” Andre answers calmly. Tori doesn’t understand how he is so calm in this situation but freaks out over much more minor things. “But I do think sometimes intervening is the right thing to do when a friend is *hurting* themselves.”

“I can’t *believe* you’re—”

“We wouldn’t be a thing if they hadn’t done what they did,” Andre says bluntly. “Maybe it’s selfish, maybe I’m too willing to overlook their bullshit, but I’m happier with you.”

Tori hates to admit it, especially because she’s going to catch shit from Jade for this, but, “Honestly? Someone should have done what they did for you a long time ago. You were *not* okay. And you would never listen to reason when it came to wolfsbane.”

“I know that!” Trina splutters, seeming to surprise even herself. “I’m much happier, I’m much more clear-headed, but it *still* doesn’t excuse—”

“No one’s saying it does,” Andre interrupts. He frowns at Trina. “But I really don’t understand. Why were you so afraid of changing?”

“I wasn’t *afraid*,” Trina snarls. “I just *hate* it!”

“But *why*?” Andre presses.

“Because it’s boring and I look *stupid!*”

“You do not. You look...” he searches for words. “*Majestic.*”

Trina makes a horrified gagging sound. Tori looks at her in confusion. “I’m the most *boring* gray-ass wolf there *is*,” Trina complains. She gestures at Tori. “At least *you* get to be a nice color.”

Tori stares incredulously. “Trina. Are you telling me you avoided changing for *ten years* because you don’t like your *coat color*?”

“That’s not the only reason!” Trina argues. “But it’s not *fair!* You and Mom get to be all these shades of brown, and at least Dad is a silvery wolf, but I’m like Grandma’s-hair *gray*, just plain *boring*, like I’m eighty-five years old!”

Tori looks over at Jade incredulously, while Jade presses her mouth together, clearly trying not to laugh. “At least as a human you can do all *sorts* of things to make yourself less hideous, huh, Trina?” Jade prods.

To Tori’s surprise, Trina points at Jade and shouts, “*Exactly!*”

“You don’t look like anyone’s grandma when you’re a wolf,” Andre tells her. It’s half-sincere and half-incredulous.

“Well, *thank you* for your expert opinion,” Trina rolls her eyes. She turns her attention back to Sinjin and Burf, who haven’t moved from their places on the floor. “What am I supposed to do with these losers?”

“Forgive them?” Andre suggests.

“Not a chance. At least, not *yet*,” Trina snarls. She glares at them both. “We’ve been friends for years now. I thought we had a good thing going on.”

“We did,” Sinjin replies. “We *do*.”

“I *like* living with you,” Trina admits. She looks pensive. “Okay. Here’s what we’re going to do. Neither of you are allowed to talk to me unless I talk to you for the next month. You do all my laundry. Twice a week you have to leave when I say so Andre and I can have the apartment.”

“Ew!” Tori can’t help but express.

“You’ll get an hour’s warning before you have to be *out*,” Trina adds. She looks at Tori, Jade, and Andre in turn. “What am I missing?”

“I’d suggest they have to give you pedicures, but they might like that too much,” Jade snarks.

“No, I like it,” Trina replies. “What Jade said.”

“They have to make you coffee in the morning?” Andre suggests.

“They already do that.”

“Oh. Then breakfast. And coffee and breakfast for me, too.”

“Done,” Trina says decisively. She gazes thoughtfully at Tori.

“Don’t look at me,” Tori says. “I had to be your servant for like not even a week and I barely survived.”

“Oh, and you have to be my servant for a month,” Trina says to the boys. “Obey my *every* whim. Make that two months.” Tori winces, shaking her head.

Sinjin and Burf glance at each other. “We accept your terms,” Sinjin answers, but his face crumples a little. “Will we be friends again someday?” he asks in a pained voice.

“We’ll *always* be friends,” Trina assures them. “But right now, you’re my friends who are also my servants.”

“Okay!” Sinjin and Burf say eagerly.

“I think you’re going to regret this,” Jade tells Trina.

“I doubt it,” Trina says breezily. “Come on, Andre.” She glances at Tori and Jade. “You can leave now, no one’s going to die.”

“I’m not leaving without a good cup of coffee,” Jade says stubbornly.

But Tori thinks she recognizes the look that Trina and Andre exchange as they go back to the bedroom. “No, we’re getting out of here,” she tells Jade. “I’ll drive, we’ll stop somewhere.”

Jade groans exaggeratedly, but doesn’t argue. “Thanks for having us,” she says to Sinjin and Burf’s backs as they slink back to their room. “It was *not* a pleasant stay.”

“We loved having you!” Burf replies brightly.

Jade rolls her eyes. Tori slips a hand into hers as they gather their things and leave.

For as grouchy and stubborn and *mean* as Jade can be, Tori never regrets having her by her side, in a crisis, or even in the silly moments, like when they sit at a diner early on a summer morning, exchanging tired smiles and laughing themselves silly at Trina freaking out about her *fur color*, of all things.

Life is pretty great with Jade by her side.

# Trust

**August 2016**

As school is about to start back up again, it's no surprise to Melanie that Freddie is a bit more attentive and solicitous than usual. They've been seeing each other all summer (though, of course, with the stipulation that it's not serious and therefore not exclusive), except the times when Freddie goes to Los Angeles to spend time with his other friends. Melanie would be open to accompanying him, but she wouldn't want to show up in her sister's territory (for lack of a better word) without an invitation. Besides, Melanie usually works a summer job, to make as much money as she can before she has to refocus on her classes. It kind of defeats the purpose of making money if she takes a week off to spend money traveling.

They'd just gone to get tea (or coffee), as they always have. Walking around campus with Freddie is still one of Melanie's favorite things. She likes the mild weather, no matter what the season, the vibrant plantlife, the scent of eucalyptus, citrus flowers, and seawater on the breeze. There are things about New England she misses (the sound of fresh snow crunching under her feet, the resplendent display of autumn bursting into color, the smell of pine needles and ferns and damp earth and maple syrup) and fewer things about Seattle that she misses (the smell just before the rain, the scent of blueberries and fir trees, the sound of raindrops on the roof lulling her to sleep) but there's something unique about the Bay Area. It feels warm, mild, like it's being careful with you. It feels like being in love.

Not that...Melanie really *knows* about *that*. She glances at Freddie, embarrassed at her line of thought. But more than just the beauty of the campus and the general climate, Melanie likes her walks with Freddie because they *talk*. Freddie's an intellectual equal, and more knowledgeable in plenty of areas—though the opposite is true, too. They learn from each other, they debate with each other. It feels like nothing is off-topic.

Except for things they both keep close to the vest. The identity of Freddie's other lover, for instance (all she knows is that he's a guy, which she's fine with; it's something Freddie can't get from her). Why they're not yet having sex. Why they're not yet in a serious relationship, despite dating off and on for a year and a half. Intimacy, something that comes easily to them during those rare windows of time when one or the other of them have an empty dorm room, isn't something they can talk about. And even the intimacy that comes easily to them has parameters, guidelines, boundaries, barriers.

But the reasons *why* they can't take things further seem to grow weaker by the day. Especially when it seems so *obvious* that their feelings are growing deeper.

"I really like you, Melanie," Freddie states.

It seems to come out of nowhere. But at the same time, it's nothing new. They've been exchanging "I really like you" for a while now. It feels very middle school sometimes, but, maybe if Melanie had been able to do much dating in middle school, she'd be more adept at this stuff.

But she also senses that this is Freddie's way of starting a conversation that she isn't sure she wants to have.

"I really like you, too," she replies, giving him what she hopes is a dazzling smile.

"I was wondering if you thought we might be able to still see each other this semester," Freddie asks.

It's a fair question. Usually Melanie brings this up. But she's been weighing this, debating it within herself. "I've been trying to figure that out," she admits. "It feels like it went okay last semester, but it's senior year. I know we're *both* going to be *really* busy."

"I get that," Freddie replies. "It's—like I said, I *really* like you."

"I really like you, too," Melanie repeats.

"Then," Freddie starts, "I guess I'm just wondering why we're not more serious."

Melanie's jaw tightens. "I told you. I don't want to get carried away, because a pregnancy would absolutely *ruin*—"

"I'm not just talking about sex, here," Freddie interrupts pragmatically, though he looks pretty uncomfortable even saying the word.

"Oh."

"You keep saying that we're working toward something in the future," Freddie states, his tone making it clear that he's treading carefully. "Which I also want. And I'm fine with where we are right now. I like that we aren't exclusive. But a part of me wishes we were more... committed."

"You want to be committed but not exclusive?" Melanie asks, a little incredulous, since not being committed is, to her, the whole reason they *aren't* exclusive.

"They don't mean the same thing, do they?" Freddie points out.

"No, but—it's just not what I had in mind."

"Then we can talk about it," Freddie suggests. "But, I just *know*, something is holding you back from getting closer with me. I don't think a stronger commitment has to mean we change how we do things. I wouldn't dream of trying to take up so much of your time that you'd be at risk of your schoolwork not getting done. But I need some reassurance."

Melanie sighs and rubs her face. Freddie's right, of course. There *is* something she isn't telling him, something she hasn't wanted to talk about until they're serious. It's private, but not that big a deal in the scheme of things.

Still, if it's worrying Freddie this much, and if Freddie is talking about how he *wants* commitment with her, it's time to talk about it.

“Okay,” Melanie says. She turns to him. “Freddie, I really like you, and I’d like us to have a future together, after college. But there is something you need to know about me before I would ask you to meaningfully commit to me.”

Freddie’s expression turns serious. “You can tell me anything,” he assures her.

“Okay.” Melanie rubs her hands together. She’s never told anyone this before. But Sam has to have, right? So it can be done. She warily meets Freddie’s eye. “I’m a werewolf.”

Freddie blinks. Stares. A look of disgust and offense crosses his face. He scoffs. “Wow, okay,” he says sardonically. “Sorry I asked.”

“I’m telling you the truth,” Melanie assures him.

Freddie is already shaking his head. “You know what, if you don’t actually want to get serious with me, then that’s fine. But you don’t have to *insult* me.”

“I’m not—”

Freddie holds his hand out. “No. Not cool. I think we should take a break this semester.”

“*Freddie!*”

But he doesn’t listen. He strides away, long, angry steps for a man his height. He throws his half-full cup of coffee into the nearest trash can as he passes it. The thud it makes as it hits the bottom seems to ricochet through Melanie’s heart.

She stares after him, fighting tears.

That isn’t how she thought that would go.

-

Robbie had just come back to his dorm room after taking a shower. He’s only wearing boxers and a tank top because, well, that’s enough cover to wear to walk back to his dorm room. He still hasn’t decided if he’s going to actually get dressed to go eat dinner at one of the dining halls that is open or if he’s just going to eat something in his dorm room. If he decides to stay, hey, boxers and a tank top are his pajamas, so he’s already set.

But while he wakes up his computer to check his email, he hears urgent knocking at his door.

“Um, hold on!” Robbie calls. He reaches for his pants, but the knocking just continues. He hops, one pant leg on, to peek through the peephole.

It’s Freddie. And he does *not* look happy.

It doesn’t matter if he’s dressed. Robbie opens the door quickly. “Freddie! Come in, what’s wrong?”



Freddie doesn't even appear to see him. He crosses the room and leans against Robbie's bed, mouth tight, eyes on the floor. He shakes his head. "Melanie..." He doesn't seem to know how to finish the thought. He just closes his eyes briefly. "It's over."

"Well, my gosh, I'm so sorry," Robbie laments. He may have been jealous at times, over Freddie's obvious preference for the woman he'd been seeing, but Robbie hadn't really regarded her as a rival, at least, not since he'd reunited with Beck. He'd been happy for Freddie that Melanie made him so happy.

"I don't want to talk about it," Freddie says flatly, before Robbie can even ask.

Robbie approaches him cautiously and puts a hand on his shoulder. "Do you want to sit?" he asks.

Freddie turns to him, and it's as if he's taking in Robbie for the first time. Robbie *feels* the way his eyes sweep over him. It makes his guts feel warm; it's *rare* for someone to look at Robbie like Freddie is right now, like he *wants* him. It's something for a long time Robbie only felt coming from Beck. Even with everything he and Freddie have done together, it's always felt like Freddie has held back, had guarded his enthusiasm behind his eyes. Maybe to maintain the framework that they were just friends. Fuckbuddies (who don't exactly *fuck*, but are certainly *intimate*). Or maybe it was as simple as Freddie still wrestling with exactly how into being with men he actually is.

There's no question about it now, with the way he's looking at Robbie, who suddenly feels almost naked in the very same clothes he often wears around his roommate (the rare times his roommate is around).

But Freddie's voice is even as he says, "Sure. We can sit."

Robbie puts a little space between them as they sit on the edge of his bed. Not because he *doesn't* want Freddie to pounce on him. But because he's not entirely sure Freddie is in his right mind right now, anyway. "Do you want to, um, watch—"

"I really thought I had a future with her."

"I...thought you didn't want to talk about it."

Freddie shakes his head. "I don't. It's...I don't even know what to do. But I'm glad you're here."

"I'm glad I can be here for you," Robbie offers. "As, like. Backup."

Freddie's brow crinkles. "What do you mean?"

Robbie shrugs. "I'm used to being someone's second choice."

Freddie's scowl deepens. "That's not what I'm saying. I didn't even want to *make* a choice because you're both important to me. Melanie made a choice. And I...I really like you, Rob."

Robbie feels his heart being crushed by a vice in his chest. “I really like you, too, Freddie,” he says quietly. He’s speaking the truth, but he doubts that Freddie is. Freddie is *spiraling*, trying to hold onto *something*, and Robbie doesn’t know what to do.

“I just, I don’t know how to build a *future* with someone. Melanie...doesn’t care about me. And you’ve already got Beck.”

Robbie laughs. “That’s his screenname! Got Beck?” He lowers his voice in an impersonation of the old milk ads. But Freddie just stares at him incredulously. Robbie sobers. “I have Beck for *now*,” he admits. “But, I mean, look at him. He’s going to move on from me eventually.” That’s still his sincere belief.

Freddie frowns, but nods slowly, as if considering Robbie’s position. “But if you’re already serious with him, then you can’t get closer with me.”

“I...*technically* I can,” Robbie admits. It hasn’t been the parameters of his open relationship with Beck that has prevented him from exploring further with Freddie. He’s been trying to protect his own heart. It’s not just *Freddie* who is avoiding getting closer. Robbie has been, too. Both because he doubts Freddie *can* feel deeply for him, and for other reasons.

“What do you mean?” Freddie asks.

“I—I mean, I’m *allowed* to go further with you, as far as Beck is concerned,” Robbie admits. “I just, it hasn’t felt *right*.”

“But—why not?” Freddie asks. He leans closer, his hand resting on Robbie’s stomach. It’s simple, but it makes his heart leap in his chest. “I *like* you,” Freddie stresses. “And, sure, maybe I’m a little heartbroken over what happened with Melanie, but that doesn’t change how I feel about you.”

“You really know how to woo a guy,” Robbie jokes. Admittedly, the mention of Melanie hadn’t done much to crank Robbie up. But the idea that Freddie might *feel something*...it’s hard to unhear that. It’s hard not to wish for that.

It wouldn’t be *fair*. Beck isn’t out there seeking another boyfriend. But, ultimately, Freddie probably isn’t either. He’s seeking more *intimacy* with Robbie. That doesn’t *have* to be a romance. It can be...*closeness*. More forms of sex. Emotional support. The things he misses about being with Beck physically that he only gets fractions of from Freddie.

This is a bad idea. All of it is. But Robbie is being swept up in the possibility of someone *wanting him this much*...

He may not get many more chances like this.

But still. There’s something he can’t let Freddie walk into blind.

“I want to be closer with you,” Robbie tells Freddie. He can see the way Freddie smiles, the way he clearly thinks that at least *someone* is about to choose him, to assuage his broken heart. “But there’s something you need to know first.”

Freddie looks wary. “Okay...” he says.

“Only Beck knows this. So...it means something to me to tell you,” Robbie prefaces. He hesitates, briefly. Does he really want to take away something that makes his relationship with Beck special? But if he wants a deeper relationship with Freddie, it *feels* necessary.

He takes a deep breath.

“I’m a werewolf,” Robbie tells Freddie.

Freddie’s eyes go wide. He leaps off the bed, pointing his finger at Robbie accusingly. “*You!*” he shouts.

Robbie is *alarmed*, maybe even a little *frightened*. He expected disbelief, maybe even Freddie spinning out a plausible scientific explanation for Robbie’s condition. Not this. “Yes, me,” he clarifies.

“*How can you two do this to me?*” Freddie howls. “You must’ve *planned* this! *Why?* Were you both *so* upset that we weren’t *exclusive* that you’d want to *hurt me like this!*?”

This makes no sense to Robbie. “Of course not! What are you even—”

“Don’t talk to me!” Freddie hollers. He hurries out of Robbie’s dorm, slamming the door behind him.

Robbie curses, leaps to follow, then remembers his state of dress. *Shit*. He puts on clothes as quickly as he can, and prepares to follow his angry friend turned fuckbuddy turned almost maybe kind of sort of something resembling a boyfriend out of the building.

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He can’t believe it. So quickly, he went from having two relationships, of sorts, that felt balanced and like they served different needs and desires for him, to having *nothing*.

He can’t even understand how it happened. How did Melanie and Robbie find each other? What made them decide they were unhappy with the situation? He knows it’s a prank, and a cruel one, with both of them giving the same absolutely *batshit* reason for why they can’t be with him more seriously. It’s revenge. For wanting too much, Freddie supposes.

The long walk from Robbie’s dorm to his own seems to take no time at all, and Freddie is relieved to find that his roommate is out. Probably hanging out with friends who’ve arrived back on campus, who Freddie hasn’t even tried to see yet because he’s been so wrapped up with Melanie and Robbie.

When it comes down to it, Melanie had felt like his future. The safer choice to *build* a future with, though that was also because Robbie already had Beck. Freddie thought he could easily fall in love with Melanie, maybe even was *starting* to, if it hadn’t felt like such deep feelings weren’t quite *allowed*, because Melanie couldn’t handle them quite yet.

But Robbie's someone Freddie felt intimate with in a different way. Whereas he and Melanie were bound by certain gendered structures and expectations that dictated the ways they interacted, he and Robbie had a real, *solid* friendship to build off of, which made their intimacy feel stronger to Freddie in some ways. The things he and Melanie did together felt magical and special because they were rare, because it was part of growing closer. The things he and Robbie did together felt magical and special because they already knew each other so well, and realized there was still so much more to discover.

Maybe he'd hedged his bets on Melanie. It'd certainly be easier to move through life being perceived as a straight man. But that didn't mean he didn't have real feelings for Robbie, similar, though maybe not identical to his feelings for Melanie. They just felt out of place in their arrangement. Out of place within the confines of Robbie's open relationship.

Maybe he shouldn't have brought them to Robbie. But he'd wanted to know if maybe there might be someone who would choose him, after all the choosing he did to keep both of them in his life.

And now he's just confused and hurt.

He stares at his ceiling, wondering if he might cry. His mother would probably tell him that it's healthy to let it out and encourage him to cry, and if it didn't happen quickly enough, rub freshly cut onion on his face to *make* it happen.

But what does she know?

He hears voices outside his door.

Is it his friends? He wonders if he should just open the door. His roommate is notorious for forgetting which pocket he put his keys in and taking forever to unlock the door on his own.

Freddie opens the door.

Robbie and Melanie are standing there. Well. Sort of. They seem to be sizing each other up, walking slowly in a half-circle like they're trying to keep a precise distance between them.

Robbie looks *awed*. "You never told me that Melanie was *Sam's twin!*" he accuses Freddie, not taking his eyes off of Melanie.

Freddie isn't happy to see either of them, but he begrudgingly offers a reply, "They look less alike the more time you spend with them."

"Ah, so, you know my sister." Melanie states warily. Something about the displeased look she briefly shoots Freddie tells him she thinks Robbie is some *iCarly* fanboy.

"Well, sure! We hang out in LA when I go home," Robbie explains. He straightens abruptly. "Oh, I've forgotten my manners, I'm Robbie, by the way," he says, offering his hand, but barely, his elbow still tight against his chest.

"Melanie. As you seem to already know," Melanie replies, backing away a step and not touching his hand, an unusual act of impertinence for her. She seems not to quite know what to

make of Robbie.

“And why are you both outside my door?” Freddie asks grouchily, finally drawing both their gazes to him.

“You just *ran away*,” Robbie accuses.

Melanie looks sharply at him. “That’s what I was about to say.”

Robbie looks at her accusingly. “Freddie said you dumped him.”

Melanie looks scandalized. “I did *not*!”

“What *is* this?” Freddie interrupts, angry again. “Do you two really have nothing better to do than to *torture* me?”

“I don’t even know what you *mean*,” Melanie says imploringly. “Can I please come in? Can we talk about this?”

“Hey, I need to talk to him, too,” Robbie insists.

Freddie closes his eyes. But when it comes down to it, he doesn’t need his whole dorm to hear this argument in the hall. “Fine, come in.” He ushers them inside and locks his door.

“I’d rather talk in *private*,” Melanie says tightly. She’s looking at Robbie, kind of circling away from him.

“Why?” Freddie challenges. “You’re both in on it.”

She looks horribly confused. He wasn’t aware that she’s a good actress, but then, apparently she’s full of secrets. “What does *that* mean?” she asks.

Robbie holds up a finger. “I’m confused about that as well.” He circles the other way, forcing Melanie to move in a different direction.

“Just—just *stop*!” Freddie shouts. “Stop playing games! If this is a prank, it isn’t fucking funny! I like you both and if it wasn’t okay for me to see both of you, you should have *talked to me* instead of making this plot to shatter my heart!”

Robbie and Melanie exchange a glance, still moving slowly, almost like they’re undulating who is closer to Freddie at any given time. Their faces display worry. Good, maybe the truth will finally come out, if they ever cared *anything* for him. “I hate to beat a dead horse,” Melanie says slowly, “But I don’t think either of us know what prank you’re talking about.” Freddie groans, but she pushes on, “I told you something in confidence that I’ve never told anyone else and you just refused to listen. I didn’t break up with you. I was trying to share my truth with you.”

Freddie scoffs loudly. “You can’t just expect me to believe something scientifically *impossible*!”

“But it’s *not!*” she argues.

“I also told you something private,” Robbie reveals. “Like I said, only Beck knows. Well, other than my family, of course.”

“Who’s Beck?” Melanie asks.

“Oh. My boyfriend. Have you ever watched *Kitchen Monsters*?”

“Uhh. No.” Melanie looks between them in disgust. “The guy you refused to break up with is someone you were *cheating* with?” she asks Freddie angrily.

“Oh! No, don’t worry,” Robbie chuckles. “We’re in an open relationship. Beck knows about Freddie.” He tilts his head to the side. “Well, *sort of*. I haven’t exactly *told* him it’s Freddie—they know each other, too—because Freddie’s not really out, so—”

“Okay, that’s enough,” Freddie rubs his face. “Can you two please just get out?”

“Not until you hear me out,” Melanie says doggedly. She glances warily at Robbie. “Look, I can prove it to you.”

“So can I!” Robbie adds.

“Oh, sure, okay, why don’t you both just turn into werewolves right now?”

“It doesn’t work like that!” they both explain in unison.

They both stop moving abruptly. Melanie looks at Robbie sharply. Robbie looks at Melanie slowly. “Wait a minute,” Robbie breathes.

“You, too?” Melanie asks.

Robbie’s mouth drops open. “Wait, so that means *Sam* is one *too*?”

“Of course.”

“How did I never know that?”

“Clearly, she never told you.”

“Yeah, but...you’d think I would know!”

“There’s clearly no way to tell. Or we would’ve known upon meeting each other.” From her expression, this commonality with Robbie doesn’t seem to endear him to her.

Wait a minute, what is Freddie even thinking, trying to take this seriously. “Do you two seriously expect me to believe this?” he asks.

“Yes!” they both answer in unison again, looking askance at each other.

“You can call Beck and ask him,” Robbie says, then his face twists. “Or, maybe not, because I haven’t told him that I told you yet.”

“You haven’t prepped him to lie, you mean,” Freddie says scathingly.

“No!” Robbie insists. “It’s just that, he was the only one to know for such a long time, I need to let him know that I told you because I wanted us to be closer and—” he sighs. “It’s complicated.”

Melanie does not look happy about this at all. “Call Sam,” she suggests.

“Um, I don’t think so,” Freddie scowls. “I know about your twin pact, you know.”

Melanie’s mouth thins. “Then call Carly. Call Cat. I don’t care. I’m *not lying to you* and one of them can tell you that!”

Freddie glares at them both. Then he looks at Robbie. “What’s Cat’s number?” he asks. Cat will be honest with him. He’s seen enough to know that secrets aren’t her forte.

“Oh, man,” Robbie moans. “She’s gonna be so mad I didn’t tell her. But I didn’t know she knew about werewolves!”

“Is she human, then?” Melanie asks, her tone mildly conversational.

Robbie pauses. “I actually don’t know.”

“Hmm,” Melanie hums, as Freddie listens to the sound of the phone ringing. He has the phone on speakerphone. If Cat denies knowing anything, he wants them all to hear it.

“Hi, Freddie!” Cat answers. The background noise sounds loud. Busy. But it seems extreme the way it makes Robbie and Melanie flinch. “Everyone, it’s Freddie!” she calls.

A chorus of greetings follow, then Sam’s voice: “Why’s he calling *you*?”

“We miss you!” Cat tells him.

“I miss you guys, too. What’s going on there?”

“Oh, we’re having a last gathering at Beck’s before school starts back up again.”

Robbie sighs wistfully. “I’m sad to miss it.”

“Oh, is Robbie there, too? Hi Robbie! Guys, it’s Robbie!”

Another chorus of greetings. Freddie’s mouth thins. “Hey, can you step out for a minute? I have something to ask you.” He considers. “Actually, you can bring Sam and Carly with you, because I want to hear what they have to say, too.”

“Sure, hang on.”

Voices, jumbled sounds, then abruptly, everything muffles, and Carly muttering, “What are we doing?”

“Okay, Freddie, it’s just me, Sam, and Carly. What did you want to ask us?”

Freddie takes a deep breath and eyes Robbie and Melanie warily. He almost can’t believe he’s about to say this. But he wonders if the better way is to target Sam. “Sam, are you a werewolf?” he asks directly.

“Yeah...” Sam replies after only a short beat of silence. “Did Melanie finally tell you?”

“I did,” Melanie replies. “Hi, Sam.”

“Hey,” is Sam’s succinct, unenthusiastic reply.

“And...Carly and Cat, you both *knew* this?” Freddie presses.

“I’ve known since before we started dating,” Cat says.

“I’ve known since we were kids, because I’m one, too,” Carly replies.

Melanie nods, seeming to already know this, but Robbie gasps, “Carly? You, too?”

“Wait, so Robbie knows now, too?” Cat asks, seeming to put together that Robbie is still here listening.

“I’m a werewolf, too!” Robbie announces.

Cat gasps. “You are? Robbie, that’s so great!”

“Are you one?” he asks.

“No, I’m just a regular old Cat.” She giggles.

“Damn, Robbie, too?” Sam comments. “That makes what, like, eight of us?”

“What do you mean, eight of us?” Robbie asks.

“Eight of *what*?” Freddie is still comprehending what he’s hearing. It feels *surreal*. Is this a dream? It would almost make more sense.

“Hang on, let me count,” Sam replies. “There’s me, you,” presumably Carly, Freddie realizes, “Tori, Trina—”

“Tori and Trina?!” Robbie sounds *truly* shocked.

“Yeah, plus, Spencer, Dice, and Goomer. And now Robbie and my sister,” Sam finishes. “No, wait, so that’s nine.”

“And a half,” Carly supplies, “If we count, uh, who was that guy Tori told us about? Birth?”



“Burf,” Cat answers.

“*Burf?!!*” Robbie shrieks.

“We don’t count him,” Sam clarifies. “He can’t change.”

“I need to sit down,” Robbie says faintly.

“Hang on,” Cat says, “Robbie, does Beck know?”

“Of course,” Robbie replies.

“Then...let’s go back inside!” Cat suggests. “There’s no one in there who doesn’t know about werewolves!”

“What about Andre—oh, through Trina, and Jade has probably known for—holy shit.” Robbie sits on Freddie’s bed.

Freddie feels the same way. He sits shakily on his desk chair. Melanie just leans against Freddie’s bed, taking all this in. Freddie thinks she might look a little jealous.

While Cat announces to the party that Melanie and Robbie just told Freddie they’re werewolves, the phone line just bursts into the chaos of people talking over each other. Freddie turns off speakerphone while he waits for the dust to settle.

Robbie turns to Melanie. “So, where do you go for the full moon?” he asks.

“I don’t,” she replies simply. She locks eyes with Freddie. “I didn’t even get to explain this to Freddie, but this is hardly a big deal for me, because I don’t change.”

“*Never?*” Robbie sounds shocked. “There are some *truly* spectacular forests to the south of us!”

“I just take wolfsbane,” Melanie tells him. Freddie doesn’t even have time to ask what that even means as Melanie cocks her head with interest. “You know, I used to love hiking in Vermont. I haven’t made time to do it around here yet.”

“We could go together some full moon!” Robbie suggests eagerly.

“I told you. I don’t change.”

“Well, then you can walk with me as a human! I can make sure no one finds out we’re there.”

“Or, *Freddie* and I can go during the day sometime,” she says pointedly. She looks over at him uncertainly. “If he finally figured out we’re not playing a prank and he wants to keep seeing me?”

“Keep seeing *us*?” Robbie adds.

Freddie stares at the two of them uncertainty. “I...think so?”

Robbie's phone buzzes. He gives it a pained look. "Beck," he informs the other two. "Wondering why I told you."

From Freddie's phone, a voice is saying, "Wait, *Robbie? Robbie?*"

"Oh, uh, hang on, let me put you on speakerphone," Freddie tells the voice. "Tori? It must be Tori."

"Robbie?" Tori says in utter surprise. "You, too?"

"Tori?" Robbie answers, "I can't believe it!"

"Me neither!" Tori says enthusiastically. "Oh, wow. Shadow Creek Park is *not* big enough for all of us."

"Shadow Creek—that place where Jade tried to bury me alive?" Robbie asks in alarm.

"Yes, but that's not what we use it for now! Every month we try to get a group together to go change and run around up there! No one ever bothers us."

"You guys have been having wolf nights without me?" Robbie sounds upset. "For how long?"

"Oh, um, not that long." Even Freddie can tell this is a lie.

"For years, apparently," comes Beck's voice. "I still can't believe Jade never told me."

"What business is it of yours *what* my girlfriend turns into under the full moon?" Jade replies. "Besides, you never told me, either."

"Fair, I guess," Beck replies.

"You know what, though, I think this solves a long-time mystery," Jade announces. "Robbie, remember when you got that toy car stuck up your butt?"

Freddie looks at him in horror. "*What?*"

"It wasn't *up* my butt! It traveled through my digestive tract the *other* way!" Robbie's shoulders slump. "Clearly, I remember," he answers Jade hollowly.

"Well, I always wondered how it was possible for the hospital to be so *completely* devoid of type O blood that only Tori could possibly donate to Robbie," Jade muses. "But now I'm wondering if there might be some kind of werewolf protein they were accounting for. Tori always says there are sometimes werewolves placed in all sorts of essential places to keep werewolves' cover and provide certain necessities."

"It's true," Sam adds. "My uncles and cousins in prison always had someone in the know to get them their wolfsbane."

“Interesting,” Melanie comments. Freddie got the picture a long time ago that she doesn’t exactly keep in touch with the criminal element of her family. Or really, any of her family, aside from Sam, occasionally.

“That *would* make sense,” Robbie says in awe. “But, Jade, weren’t *you* the one to tell the doctor that Tori had type O blood?”

“Sure, but they still would’ve had to check her records. And they would’ve seen that I was correct. Tori would be a *perfect* match for Robbie.”

“That makes a lot of sense,” Tori answers, sounding just as stunned as Robbie. Then she adds, “You’re *still* a grunch for trying to get me killed so you could have a stupid part in a play!”

Freddie realizes she’s talking to Jade when she responds, “Steamboat Suzy was *the captain*, Tori! It was a great role!”

“Sikowitz sure did it well,” Cat comments.

“So there might be...scientific evidence for this,” Freddie states weakly.

A new voice cuts in. “I should introduce you to my roommates.”

“Who is this?” Freddie asks warily.

“It’s me!” The voice sounds offended.

“Um, it’s Trina,” Andre adds helpfully.

“Oh. Who’re your roommates?” Freddie asks.

“Sinjin and Burf,” Trina replies, as if he should know. “They’ve been trying to figure out what triggers werewolf powers for years now.”

“Do they...know?” Freddie asks warily.

“Not yet, but they will!” Trina says confidently.

“Being a secret means there aren’t exactly a lot of published, well-funded studies about us,” Tori comments.

“They might just be not published,” Jade suggests darkly. “Secret, underground studies, where they keep you in basements for a long time or something.”

“Jade, why?” Tori sounds distressed.

“You think they’d pay good money for volunteers?” Sam wonders.

“Sam, no,” Carly says flatly.

“So you all are telling me, under no uncertain terms, that this is real,” Freddie states.

“Why else would we have been talking about this for the past five minutes?” Cat asks.

“Everyone in this room has either been or seen a werewolf,” Carly states. “Right?” she asks.

“Right,” Beck answers, clearly the target of her question.

“I can’t believe you all had a whole *thing* without me!” Robbie moans.

“Next time you’re in town for the full moon, come with us!” Cat suggests brightly.

“I will!” Robbie says enthusiastically. “And next time there’s a full moon here,” he says to Freddie, “*We’ll* show you.” He gestures between himself and Melanie.

“*You* can show him,” Melanie says evenly.

“Still not changing?” Sam asks, sounding mildly judgmental.

“Still don’t have the time for it,” is Melanie’s pragmatic answer.

“Sure,” Sam replies dully, maybe in mild disbelief.

“Um, well, thank you, everyone, I’ll let you get back to your party,” Freddie says. “This has been...illuminating.”

A chorus of goodbyes come through Cat’s phone, and Robbie and even Melanie say their own goodbyes, and Freddie hangs up.

He stares at them both. Robbie smiles at him awkwardly. Melanie looks serious, thoughtful.

“What’s wolfsbane?” he asks.

“Oh, it’s probably the plant you think it is,” Melanie replies easily. “Toxic to humans, but for us, it suppresses the change under the full moon.”

Freddie frowns. “How do you even *find* it?”

“We don’t,” Robbie answers. “We buy it.”

“*Where?*”

“I order it from a guy in Vermont,” Melanie admits. “The only good thing my mom ever did was when she came to visit me at boarding school to help me with the first change. She tracked down another werewolf under the full moon and cornered him until the sun came up so he could tell me where to get wolfsbane. I’ve been buying it from the same guy ever since.”

“You could just go to the occult bookstore in town,” Robbie suggests. “I found out by accident that they carry it.”

Melanie looks at him curiously. “Oh, yeah? Huh.”

Freddie just shakes his head. “I have so many questions. I don’t even know where to start. I think I need to process this for a while.”

“I can understand that,” Melanie says patiently. “You let me know when you’re ready to talk.”

“It’s not over between us, right?” Robbie asks him.

Freddie just shakes his head. “I don’t think so, but I don’t know what to think right now.”

“Okay,” Robbie says quietly. “We’ll leave you alone.”

“Bye, Freddie,” Melanie says.

Freddie watches them go. Robbie holds the door for Melanie then says, “Boy, I’m hungry after all that! Want to go get some dinner?”

“You know what?” Melanie sounds skeptical, like she’s certain she’s going to regret this, but answers, “Sure. I could use someone to talk to.”

“Hot beef!” Robbie exclaims.

“Is that what they’re serving?” Melanie asks.

Freddie loses the rest of what they’re saying as his door swings shut and they move further down the hall.

He laughs in stunned disbelief. He feels like his whole world, his whole understanding of what is possible, his trust in science and in the validity of documented fact, in the certainty of human discovery, has all been shattered.

He doesn’t know *what* to think. Either werewolves are real, or everyone he knows is experiencing the same mass delusion. Or everyone he knows is trying to send him to a mental institution. Or maybe he’s experiencing some kind of psychosis.

The problem is, all the possibilities seem equally unbelievable, and equally likely.

## **September 2016**

“Okay,” Robbie instructs. “Usually if I park my car here, no one bothers it overnight.”

“But we don’t have to do that,” Melanie reminds him. “Since Freddie and I won’t be staying all night.”

“Right, right. But just like, as advice,” Robbie replies.

It’s been about three weeks since the whole debacle in which he and Melanie evidently elected to tell Freddie they were werewolves on exactly the same day. Robbie still marvels at

this, a little. What are the chances? Maybe sometimes the moon makes werewolves more synchronous than simply that they change at the same time during full moons.

In the past three weeks, he hasn't seen much of Freddie outside of eating lunch with the same friends in their computer science program, or the single class that they take together. Though from the stiff, almost formal way Melanie greeted Freddie when they got together for this excursion into the forest this evening, Robbie suspects that she hasn't seen much of Freddie either. Evidently, he wasn't kidding when he said he needed time to process this. Though classes starting maybe also played a role. Robbie knows he's been busy.

He's also been busy with Beck. Almost as soon as Beck found out that Robbie had told Freddie about being a werewolf, he'd booked a flight and a hotel to see Robbie the very next weekend, after the first official week of school.

It had been nice to see Beck, and when he arrived at Beck's hotel room, he hugged him immediately. Beck hugged back, strong and solid, though Robbie knew—they *both* knew—that the purpose of the trip hadn't exactly been just to see each other.

They needed to talk.

"So," Beck finally said when they pulled apart and sat together on the hotel bed. "Freddie *is* the guy you've been seeing."

Robbie knew there was no use in lying. He hung his head. "Yeah," he admitted.

Beck nodded. "I kind of knew it. Even though you kept insisting it wasn't him."

"I only did that because he isn't really out yet," Robbie replied.

Beck's expression changed minimally, in something like surprise. "So he *does* have something to come out about?"

Robbie thought that this was extremely obvious. "Well, yeah. He's bi."

"I guess I'd always thought he was just horny."

"He's that, too," Robbie quipped.

"Obviously. If he's seeing you *and* Sam's sister."

But Robbie didn't like the implication that Freddie was a slut. Especially when it wasn't like he was having penetrative sex with either of them, as far as he knew. "He's seeing us both because he *likes* us both. And when we all have limited time, and no one's made any serious commitment to him...hell, why not?"

"I get it," Beck replied evenly.

"Okay, so, what's the problem?"

Beck tilted his head to the side thoughtfully. “You know, I’m not sure that there *is* a problem. But I remember months ago when we decided to try again that you told me that what you had with Freddie wasn’t and couldn’t be as special as what you have with me, because Freddie didn’t *know* you like I do. Because he didn’t know your secrets.”

“Yeah.” Robbie remembered saying that.

“Well,” Beck said, “Now he does. At least, the biggest secret you have.” His brows furrowed. “It’s your secret to tell, and I get that. But it makes me wonder if our connection is deeper or different to you than what you have with him.”

Robbie knew that this was coming. But that still didn’t mean he knew how to talk about it. “Let me try to explain.”

They talked for most of the night about their relationship, and Robbie’s relationship with Freddie. Robbie expressed how confused he was, how it seemed like Freddie had deeper feelings he hadn’t been revealing, how Robbie really liked Freddie, but thought it was just friendship, but that the longer things went on, the less different friendship with Freddie felt than romance with Beck. How Robbie was still always afraid about being left behind with Beck (something that seemed to insult Beck to discover), and how just having Freddie as an almost daily presence offered a different kind of intimacy that Robbie just couldn’t have with Beck right now.

Beck discussed his fears, that Robbie would realize he cared more for Freddie than for him (which Robbie assured him wasn’t the case, that he didn’t see his affections as greater or lesser, just *different*). Beck was open about the fact that this was exactly what he had feared about opening up their relationship, that he knew he was fully capable of messing around without strings attached or feelings developing, but that he knew Robbie tended to need to build trust and connection before getting intimate with someone, and Beck had worried that just building that sort of rapport opened the door to inevitable romance. Beck talked about how he wanted to feel like he and Robbie had a kind of relationship that they didn’t have with other people, and that in his eyes, Robbie being with Freddie more often, and getting closer with him, felt like a threat to the primacy of their connection.

They discussed solutions. Should they take a break again, while Robbie finished school? Neither of them wanted that. Was Beck’s jealousy warranted? As much as Robbie tried to explain, it didn’t seem to make him feel better. Would Robbie consider breaking things off with Freddie? If Beck really, really needed it, he might, but he really didn’t want to do it, because Freddie is such an important source of support for him.

“Look,” Beck eventually said. “I never wanted an open relationship. When it comes down to it, I enjoy it, I like the validation of it, but it’s not my ideal.”

“I didn’t think it was mine, either,” Robbie answered. “Until I developed a strong connection with two different people.”

Beck looked a bit pained at that. “So,” he said slowly, “If I want to be with you, I have to accept that you’re going to be with Freddie, too. At least for now.”

Carefully, Robbie nodded. But then he pointed out, “And I have to accept that you’re going to be having sex with a bunch of the hottest guys in the world that I *definitely* can’t compare with.”

Beck blinked. “But I don’t think they compare to you. They’re just sex.”

“And I don’t think what I have with Freddie compares to what I have with you. It’s just *different*.”

Beck shook his head, but he smiled a little. “Isn’t it funny? I’d be fine if you were just fucking around on the apps, and I think you’d be happier if I just had one fuckbuddy. But neither of us are satisfied with what the other would prefer.”

“So I guess the question is, if we can accept what the other one needs?” Robbie questioned.

Beck nodded slowly. “If it’s what you need, and you still feel good about our relationship, like I do...then I can live with it.”

“I think I can, too,” Robbie replied.

Beck smirked. “But seriously, you and Freddie are just doing *hand stuff*?”

He sounded so judgmental. Robbie felt defensive. “Hey! There’s a lot you can do with just hands.”

“That’s true,” Beck admitted.

“Besides, you know what it’s like to want to move slow with a guy,” he accused. “*And* you should remember how I didn’t want to go further with you until I knew I could trust you with my secret.”

Beck’s expression darkened slightly. “I see. So that might change soon?”

“If Freddie’s ready, maybe so,” Robbie informed him boldly.

“Well, in that case,” Beck said firmly. “I’m gonna give you something you can’t get from your pretty little boytoy right now, maybe for the last time.”

“You sure know how to make a guy feel special,” Robbie quipped.

The sex was rougher than usual, but it felt to Robbie like they both needed that. The feeling of Beck tossing him onto the hotel bed, grabbing him, his firm body pressed against Robbie’s, limbs wrapped around him, fingers gripping his hair. Robbie felt like a piece of meat, but he more than most knows the appeal of such a thing, how wanting can turn to needing and can feel like the deepest sort of love.

So since telling Freddie, Robbie and Beck had found a stasis at a distance, and Robbie wonders whether things with Freddie are going to even out, once the whole question of lycanthropy is settled.



Freddie isn't expressing skepticism anymore, he just states he needs to see for himself, and Melanie is happy to let Robbie be the one to actually be the object of Freddie's curiosity in this case. "I'll answer any questions he has while you're changed," she suggests.

The wilderness to the south of campus is vast and varied, from forests and lakes to meadows and dry hills. Robbie had done some reconnaissance with Beck the summer before his first semester at Stanford, and they'd managed to find an ideal area: an open meadow that leads to a forest with hiking trails. The problem, of course, is that when the weather is nice (which is most of the time in the Bay Area), hikers occasionally linger on trails as the sun is going down, so Robbie had found an easy way to access the forest from a different area, away from the common trails, so that he has privacy and won't run into anyone as he changes.

He guides Freddie and Melanie to this area now. As the sky starts to darken and splash vibrant colors across the horizon, it's easy to feel very alone. But Robbie's nose tells him that the nearby trails aren't as deserted as they feel.

"I usually change and then lay low for a while until it gets truly dark," Robbie informs them. "To make sure I don't run into anyone I shouldn't."

Melanie nods. "Where do you change?"

"Right here," Robbie gestures.

"Right *here*?" Melanie asks. "You're just going to—right in front of us?"

"Sure, it's not like it's a big deal," Robbie scoffs.

"No offense, but I don't need to see you naked," Melanie says.

Robbie laughs. "None taken." He thinks about it. "I think."

"We'll just avert our eyes," Melanie states. When Freddie doesn't turn as Robbie starts tugging off his shirt, she nudges him, and he turns away.

"What if I want to see it happen?" he asks.

"I wouldn't recommend it," Melanie replies. "It's pretty grotesque."

"Hey!" Robbie replies.

"I don't mean *you*, I just meant transformation in general."

"I don't know, I think it's kind of cool," Robbie argues. "Like a living version of the covers of those *Animorphs* books."

Freddie stirs. "You read those?"

"In elementary school, why?"

“I was into them, too!” Freddie says excitedly, “And no one else I knew was! But I think I only read up through like book ten or eleven because some kid lost the next book and the school library didn’t bother to replace it and I didn’t want to read out of order.”

“Oh, man, I could tell you how they end!” Robbie offers.

“Guys,” Melanie interrupts. “Maybe you can talk about this later?”

“Good point,” Robbie says, glancing skyward. He doesn’t have much time left.

He decides not to announce when the change is beginning, because maybe Melanie is right, maybe Freddie *shouldn’t* watch the process. But when his weight shifts forward and his hands, halfway to paws, thump the earth in front of him, the sound draws Freddie’s attention, and he turns around.

“*Freddie*,” Melanie hisses a warning, her eyes still stolidly averted.

Robbie looks up in time to see Freddie stumble back a few steps from him, eyes wide, face ashen. His mouth flops open a few times, and a garbled expression of shock emits from his lips.

Robbie tries to smile reassuringly, but wherever his face is in its transformation, it doesn’t seem to read as anything friendly, because Freddie grabs Melanie’s shoulder and just stares at Robbie.

“I told you not to look,” Melanie sighs, still facing away.

“Wh—he’s—fu—uaghlak—” Freddie dissolves into gibberish again.

“Like I said,” Melanie continues in a patient tone. “Not so nice to look at.”

“*Wow*,” Freddie finally utters.

His awe seems to raise Melanie’s metaphorical hackles; Robbie can sense it, though he can’t articulate how (and that’s only partly because he can’t articulate *anything* with his wolf’s jaw and larynx). In less than a minute, the transformation is complete, and Freddie continues to watch in amazement.

“Hokay,” Freddie gasps as Robbie stands before him, tentatively wagging his tail. “It’s real. It’s *very* real.”

Melanie turns around and cocks her head slightly to take in Robbie’s canine appearance. She nods in apparent satisfaction. “Well. There’s Robbie,” she informs Freddie.

“I know,” he gulps. He continues staring for a long moment. “What now?” he asks.

Melanie shrugs. “I’m not exactly the expert here.”

Robbie steps forward and pushes his head toward Freddie’s hand. Freddie jerks his hand away, seemingly on instinct, then tentatively reaches back out to pat Robbie’s head gently.

Robbie closes his eyes, feeling gentle taps on the top of his skull.

With a sigh, Melanie says, “Don’t you know how to pet a dog?” Then adds. “No offense,” before reaching over and scratching Robbie vigorously behind the ears and down his neck. Robbie’s tail wags harder.

“I wasn’t sure—” Freddie starts, then Robbie feels four hands, scratching behind his ears and along the scruff of his neck and between his shoulder blades. His tail wags so hard his whole body moves.

“We may resemble wolves, but we retain a lot of humanity,” Melanie explains to Freddie. “So in that sense, we’re much more like domesticated canids.”

“Even so, he doesn’t quite look like a wolf,” Freddie notes. “The proportions are off.” He steps back to curiously take in more of Robbie. “Is it just because he’s tall as a human that his legs are so long?”

“No,” Melanie replies. “At least, I don’t think so. I’m short, and I have disproportionately long legs as a wolf, too, from what I recall.”

“Huh,” Freddie notes. “And the paws...”

“Right. Slightly more dexterous. I don’t think they’re as useful as they look.”

“This is *so weird*,” Freddie says faintly. “How—*why* is the wolf form so...distinct?”

“I don’t know,” Melanie replies. They lapse into silence, regarding Robbie curiously. He awkwardly scratches at his ear with his hind paw and smells the air. There are still people about. He still has to lay low.

“His fur is so *thick*,” Freddie comments.

“It keeps us warm,” Melanie replies. “Oh, and I guess we vary in color? My fur isn’t black like his. I think I’m more...bronze, I guess.”

“Oh. Sam, too?”

“I assume so.” Melanie shifts the topic from her sister abruptly. “I was thinking about your question for why our wolves look the way we do. I wonder if it’s a form of evolutionary mimicry. If lycanthropes have always lived among humans, perhaps it was most advantageous to take the form of something resembling the first animal that humans domesticated, whose presence among human civilizations wouldn’t be as frightening? But because it’s mimicry, it’s not an exact replica.”

Robbie tilts his head and tries to hum in his throat. It comes out almost like a whimper. But Melanie nods at him like she understands his interest and potential agreement.

“That’s a good point,” Freddie replies.

Melanie shrugs. “Just a thought. I’m not an evolutionary biologist. And I can’t say anyone seems to know where werewolves come from.”

Robbie sniffs around among the undergrowth while Freddie and Melanie chat about the origins of werewolves. It’s certainly a question Robbie has considered. It’s a universal desire to want to know more about one’s history, one’s people. But the secrecy of lycanthropes has prevented anything but myths and legends from surviving. There’s no way to know about their origins.

It makes him sad if he thinks about it. But being a werewolf isn’t his *whole* history. He’s also Jewish. At least the side of his culture that aligns with humanity has a deep and rich history that he can actually delve into. Even if parts of that are sad, too.

Maybe existential questions aren’t the best thing to consider, not when there’s a whole world, redolent with fragrances, for him to experience.

He doesn’t smell the warmth of people’s presence anymore. He’s probably safe. He’ll still be careful for a little while, but he can likely enjoy the forests without running into any danger. Like most animals, his greatest threat is humans.

He yips slightly as he dashes off into the woods, then circles back, looking at the two humans (or, two human-shaped people) and wagging his tail.

Freddie looks confused, but Melanie seems to understand him. “I think he’s going to go running around. High amounts of activity is helpful for keeping us balanced.”

Freddie gazes at her with interest. “Is that why you joined the lacrosse club last year?”

“Sure, that and I love lacrosse,” Melanie answers.

“I thought it seemed a bit aggressive for you. It makes sense now.”

“Well, I *am* a Puckett,” Melanie says somewhat bitterly. She turns and nods to Robbie. “I hope you have a good time out there tonight, Robbie.” She gives him a brief scratch behind the ears.

“I’ll come pick you up in the morning,” Freddie tells him. He actually kneels down to be face to face with him as he pets his neck and chest. He jerks back as Robbie tries to lick him, though. Robbie guesses he can’t blame him. Most dogs have much dirtier mouths.

Robbie watches as Freddie and Melanie walk back to the car, standing close together, using their phones to light the way, Freddie trying to guide Melanie chivalrously, but Melanie doing more of the guiding with her superior senses.

They’re cute. Maybe it’s a little weird, but Robbie likes them together.

Robbie enjoys his night in the forest. He’s used to being alone on a full moon night since coming to Stanford, but a part of him keeps hoping that Freddie and Melanie will reappear.

They don't reappear that night, but in the morning, when Freddie comes to pick Robbie up, Robbie is surprised to find Melanie with him, with a fast food egg and sausage sandwich in her hands for Robbie.

Robbie decides he likes having her around.

# Harmony

**November 2016**

“Do I *have* to?” Sam groans.

“I guess you don’t *have* to do anything,” Cat replies, the disappointment in her voice clear. “But you should.”

Sam doesn’t like that answer. She turns to Carly. “Why don’t *you* do it?”

“Because Melanie isn’t my sister?”

Sam groans again. “I still don’t understand why Freddie can’t just decide to bring her. Why does everyone act like she and I have to decide things in unison just because we look alike?”

“Sam, you threatened to *murder* Freddie when you found out he was dating your sister, so *maybe* people can be forgiven for assuming that you might actually care about her,” Carly observes.

“I was mad at Freddie, because he *hid* it from me! It wasn’t even really *about* Melanie!”

“So, you don’t really care what she does?” Cat asks.

“Not really, no.”

“Great! Then it shouldn’t be a big deal to call her and invite her to spend winter break in Los Angeles!” Cat replies triumphantly.

Sam sighs. This is *so stupid*. But, “Fine, if it *really* matters so much to everybody, I’ll call my sister.”

“I really don’t know why you’re fighting everyone on this,” Carly comments. “The more people who show up, the less we all have to chip in for the cabin. And you *love* saving money.”

“It’s not Melanie coming that I have a problem with. It’s everyone thinking it’s up to *me*,” Sam answers as she punches at Melanie’s name in her contact list. “She’s an adult. She can make her own deci—hey, Melanie.”

“Hi, Sam!” her sister answers. She sounds surprised by the call. “How are you?”

“Fine,” Sam answers, then gets right to the point. “Listen, if you need an invitation to come to Los Angeles for winter break, here it is. You should come down.”

“Winter break?” Melanie sounds pensive. “Oh, that’s very kind of you, but I should pick up as many hours at work over the break as I can.”

“What?” Sam is angry. All this effort, and Melanie isn’t even coming? “Then why did I even bother to *call* you?”

“I don’t know, I didn’t *ask* you to call me, did I?” Melanie sounds almost confused.

Sam is angry at her sister for making her go through this just to shoot her down and she’s about to tell her off and hang up when the possibility hits her: maybe Freddie *didn’t even talk to his girlfriend about coming to Los Angeles over the break yet*.

That *coward*.

“Let me ask you something,” Sam drawls, almost sweetly. “What are *Freddie’s* plans for the break?”

“That’s a good question,” Melanie replies. “As far as I know, he hasn’t decided yet. I know Robbie wants to come down to LA, and he thought he might go with him, but he wasn’t sure.”

Sam *could* just let the three idiots in the northern part of the state figure this out for themselves. She could let her sister have a lonely Christmas alone on her mostly-empty campus while she works whatever jobs she takes when she’s not in school, she could let Freddie figure out how to split his time, and feel guilty for either letting down his friends or letting down his girlfriend.

But, as stupid and annoying as Freddie is, she also wants him to be happy.

So she grits her teeth and says, “Maybe his decision would be *a lot* easier if you’d just agree to come along with him. I’m sure he’d love that.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Melanie says uncertainly. “I *do* have to—”

“Melanie! Hey. Just because we went without for so long doesn’t mean we have to make it our *default*.”

“Sam, I need to work to get things for school.”

“Then I’ll buy your damn books this semester, but *come on*. You’re on *break*. Take a goddamn break.”

“You really mean that?”

“What?” Sam asks, then realizes. “Oh, about the books? Sure.” She can figure out how to scrounge that.

“You don’t need to do that,” Melanie tells her. “My grant covers the cost of my books.”

Grants, scholarships, whatever. None of it means much to Sam. “Well, then you can’t need to work *that* badly.” She takes a breath. “Maybe we can spend like, *one* holiday in our lives together pretending to be a fucking family.”

“I’d like that,” Melanie replies softly.

“So then...you’ll come down for break?”

“I’ll come down for break,” Melanie agrees.

Jesus, that took long enough. Freddie really owes her. “Alright, good. Bye.”

“Bye, Sam!”

Sam hangs up and turns to see Cat and Carly holding hands and pressing their other hands to their hearts, looking emotional. “Oh, for *god’s* sake.”

“It’s so *sweet* that you want to see Melanie for Christmas!” Carly blubbers.

“I don’t even *care*, I just want her and Freddie to be happy.”

Carly and Cat exchange a look. “That’s even *sweeter*!” Carly wipes at her face.

“I miss my brother!” Cat announces, now crying herself.

“Oh, babe, come here,” Sam murmurs, drawing Cat in to hold her.

Good. At least if they’re comforting Cat, no one has to talk about the fact that maybe, finally, Sam is ready to stop resenting her sister for being so completely different from her, and start trying to see if they can help each other live full lives, despite their childhoods.

## **December 2016**

As soon as they finish their finals, Melanie, Freddie, and Robbie are in the car heading down to Los Angeles, because they have plans.

Melanie has to admit she’s excited. She’s been so curious about Los Angeles, and Freddie’s friends, and her sister’s life. The call she’d gotten from her sister last month had felt like a punch to the gut. Sam telling her she didn’t have to *deprive* herself to be seen as good and worthy. Who else could even understand that? Maybe she and Sam don’t talk much, but she still thinks in some ways they understand each other like no one else can.

For the first time, Melanie is taking a *break*. A *vacation*. No work. No school. No internships or volunteering or all the other things she used to do to have the excuse of staying in Vermont at boarding school when classes weren’t in session and she was too young to get a paying job. For once, Melanie is doing something that *isn’t* in service to her greater goal of success.

Because maybe, just maybe, the *people* in her future might be just as important as a career.

It’s something she’s considered as she and Freddie have grown closer over the past several months, despite being busy with school. They’d managed to make time to see each other fairly regularly. Now that her secret was out in the open, and that she understood more about



Robbie's importance to Freddie, it felt as if they could truly build intimacy together. It felt like they had started to lay down the foundation for an actual future together, in which they knew and *trusted* each other.

Trust doesn't come easily to Melanie. Not exactly surprising, she knows. She's always found that a sunny disposition and maintaining a polite and friendly outward appearance endears people to her without them even realizing she's not offering them any kind of real closeness in return.

Her friendships at boarding school were like that; it was easy to hide the things that made her different because the fact that she was there, and the fact that they all wore school uniforms, made her lack of money easy to obscure; no one had to know she was on scholarship. And her mother favored her just enough to find ways to send her things like PearPhones and other gadgets so she seemed to "keep up" with her peers. It helped that she was reasonably attractive, smart, and athletic. She could blend in. Otherwise, she was so nice and willing to listen that people would confide in her, thank her for keeping their confidences and for her kindness, and never consider that she knew so much about them and they knew very little about her in return.

She imagines now, that if the girls she went to boarding school talk about her, they smile and say, "Oh, she was *so nice!*" And then if they wonder what she's up to now, and their smiles fade as they realize none of them have any idea.

It's not that she used them. She genuinely *liked* most of them. But she never trusted them, and that made it impossible to form real, lasting friendships.

But she's been learning to trust Freddie, with her secrets, and lately, with her heart and even her body, to an extent. And as unexpected and *weird* as it is, she's learning to trust Robbie, in a different way.

Sharing the same secret as Robbie had bonded them, as much as Melanie hadn't embraced it. They don't exactly spend a lot of time together, but they have a few things in common—lycanthropy and Freddie, mostly—and she's learned to tolerate him. They're probably not going to be best friends, but they can be confidants. More like comrades than besties.

But she's about to find out how her sister has fared. Though she doubts anyone would exactly call Sam *nice*, Sam has managed to build a network of friends who apparently can be trusted with *her* secrets. Of course, one big difference between them is that Sam has always had Carly as a true and deep friend. Melanie is friends with Carly, too, but the only reason they're as close as they are is because of Sam. Sam is Carly's true connection.

Maybe Sam can teach Melanie a little something about having real friends. It's a little weird to feel like Sam might be the more well-adjusted of the two of them, at least in this realm.

"So I've been thinking," Freddie states from behind the wheel, turning down the music so he can be heard, breaking Melanie out of her thoughts.

"What're you thinking about?" Robbie asks, leaning forward so his head is between the front seats and he can be more involved in the conversation.

“I just...sorry, it *still* blows my mind that you two are *werewolves*.”

Melanie glances at Robbie, who raises his eyebrows and shrugs. “I get it,” Melanie says sympathetically. “But why are you still on about it?” It’s not like she’s *ashamed*, it just isn’t something that really impacts her day to day life. Sure, she can understand why it’s *interesting* to Freddie, but she doesn’t feel the need to talk about it much. She, Robbie, and Freddie have talked about it more in the past several months than she thinks she ever has, since her mom came to visit her and guide her through her first change. Even she and Sam have rarely discussed it.

“Sorry, I know it’s probably pretty weird that I’m so interested in it,” Freddie admits. “But I just keep thinking about how you two have to keep it a secret all the time. How you have to be so careful about who you tell. How, Robbie, you’ve been friends with Tori for *years* and had no idea!”

“Yeah!” Robbie says passionately. “I *still* can’t believe that.”

“But that’s what I mean, your impulse to keep it a secret is *so* strong, it makes you miss chances to connect with people,” Freddie explains.

Melanie straightens a little and watches him carefully. It’s almost like Freddie was reading her thoughts. Of course, it isn’t *just* lycanthropy that has made it difficult for Melanie to trust people. That pattern started for her long before her mother explained to her about being a werewolf. But it compounds the issue. Melanie would isolate socially because she felt so *different*, even as she did everything she could to appear to be the same. Being a werewolf just made her *more* different.

“I hadn’t thought about it like that,” Robbie replies. “I think in my case it’s more my... *awkwardness* that makes it hard for me, though,” he admits.

Melanie nods her agreement, though awkwardness isn’t her specific issue. “But keeping such a secret doesn’t help,” she admits.

“Right,” Robbie agrees.

“And that got me thinking about my, uh, bisexuality,” Freddie says. His face seems to pinch a little as he talks about it. Melanie knows he still isn’t that comfortable discussing it, though it’s been a pretty obvious factor in their relationship for a while now. “What if keeping *my* secret is just...keeping me away from people, too?”

Again, Melanie glances at Robbie, who looks thoughtful. “Maybe so,” Robbie starts. “I’ve just always been so *obviously* different that I didn’t *have* to do much coming out. As you know,” he addresses Freddie, “I usually have to come out about liking *girls*, too!”

Melanie tilts her head to the side. “Really?”

“See what I mean?” Robbie says, obviously a little chagrined.

“Sorry,” Melanie replies, flashing him a placating smile. “That was rude of me. But I honestly didn’t know.”

“And now you know Robbie better,” Freddie replies, “Because he told you something new about himself.”

Melanie nods. “True,” she acknowledges, though it doesn’t feel like that significant of a discovery. It’s really only surprising to her because Robbie is seeing Freddie and also has another boyfriend. She’d assumed it indicated a preference. And, maybe it does, she realizes, but it doesn’t encompass Robbie’s *whole* sexuality. “So does that mean you want to be more out?” she asks Freddie.

Freddie shrugs. He’s still clearly conflicted. “I’ve been thinking about it,” he admits. “I’ve really only told you two, and Carly and Spencer. And Robbie says that Beck knows.” Melanie can see him glance at Robbie in the rearview mirror. “And it’s kind of felt weird in the past, to go to LA with Robbie and have to hide. I mean, most of the time, he spends his time there with Beck, anyway, so it wasn’t really the *place* for us, but…” Freddie trails off.

“Beck and I have been talking about being open about our, uh, openness,” Robbie reveals. “He has to hide so much in his career and in the public spotlight that he wants to be as honest as he can with our friends.”

“So why hasn’t he?” Freddie asks.

“Because,” Robbie admits, “I was worried that telling them about our arrangement would out you before you were ready. It’s not like Beck didn’t know right away, even when I tried not to tell him.”

Freddie’s mouth thins a little, and he nods. “Then on this trip, let’s do it,” he says bravely. “You two have to keep a *real* secret, my sexuality is small potatoes in comparison.” He glances at Melanie and his face falls a little. “Um,” he asks in a slightly quieter voice, though Melanie knows that Robbie will *certainly* be able to hear. “Is it okay with you?”

“Is *what* okay with me?” she asks.

“If I…come out?”

Melanie blinks. “Why wouldn’t that be okay with me?”

“Because—I just thought—some girls wouldn’t like what it says about us—”

“It doesn’t say *anything* about us that I’m unhappy about,” Melanie replies. “We’re not exclusive, and you get to explore your sexuality, and I’m happy for you.” She doesn’t say it aloud, but she thinks his sexuality probably makes him better in bed. She knows the stereotype is guys pushing for penetrative sex quickly, but since they recently progressed to below-the-belt activity, Freddie has been happy to explore her with just his hands so far. Which is good, because it’s all Melanie is ready for. Perhaps a side effect of all the masks she wears in life, she often feels very little connection with her body. Awakening to her sexuality has been slow, and she’s happy Freddie is willing to let her take her time.

Freddie gives her a tender smile. She can tell this means a lot to him. Granted, she hasn't always been *thrilled* about the idea of them not being exclusive, but she's kind of come around to it more. *She* might not have any interest in devoting the time and energy necessary to build trust with a second person, but she can see that it's important to Freddie. She thinks it actually makes them stronger, the fact that he's willing and able to still make her feel so special and important to him when he has other options.

And, really, when it comes down to it, her reticence toward his openness has very little to do with him being involved with a guy. Actually, she thinks she'd prefer that to him having another girlfriend. Is that arbitrary and unfair? Probably. Melanie isn't interested in parsing it out further, though.

Because they had to leave in the afternoon, they stop for dinner on the way down; Inside Out Burger at least has an off-menu grilled cheese that Melanie likes, a pleasant surprise when she'd moved to California. It's night when they make it to her sister's apartment, barely a mile from the beach in Venice, but there's no mistaking the scent of the ocean as they approach.

"Here we are," Freddie says unnecessarily as they park. They unload the car and walk to Sam's apartment, carrying their bags. Freddie knocks.

"It's open!" someone calls, and Freddie leads the way inside.

"Hi, guys!" The first person to greet them is Carly, who is all smiles as she offers each of them a hug. She gives Melanie an extra squeeze. "It's good to see you," she tells her.

"You, too!" Melanie happily answers.

"Beck!" Robbie cries, dropping his backpack and flinging himself at a handsome man who stands up from the sofa. Melanie takes him in with interest. He's *very* attractive, and from what she's gathered, he's an actor on some hot show she hasn't watched. She sees it now. She has to marvel a little at Robbie's charisma, to have two hot men who want him so much.

Beck holds Robbie for a long moment, eyes closed contentedly, and Melanie looks away, wanting to give them their moment.

"Hey," Sam greets Freddie and Melanie with equal indifference.

But Melanie brightens at the sight of her sister. Gosh, when's the last time they even saw each other? When Sam was riding around the country on her motorcycle? Sam looks *good*. During that motorcycle journey, she'd looked pale, her features drawn. There was something ragged and gaunt about her appearance that had less to do with her actual weight and more to do with how she carried herself. She'd moved like she was carrying a burden, like her limbs were weak, like her mind was too full of agony.

Now, she looks much more like Melanie remembers. The ease in her posture, the casual grace in her steps, the strength in her shoulders, in the set of her jaw. She looks like she doesn't give a single fuck about anything that's happening, the way she always used to.

Like anything else when it comes to a Puckett, this much is probably a mask as well. Like Melanie's outward presentation of joy, it's close enough to Sam's truth that it's not much of a concern. But she gives her twin a reassuring smile, anyway, just as a signal that she can drop her guard.

"Melanie, this is my girlfriend, Cat," Sam introduces her. "And you already know Carly. Oh, and that's Beck. He's here for Robbie."

"Evidently," Melanie replies, glancing to see the way the men are still holding each other. She smiles brightly at Cat. "I've heard so much about you! It's so nice to finally meet you!"

"Me, too!" Cat replies. "Well, I've heard a little bit about you, actually," she amends, shooting a disappointed look at Sam. "Can I hug you?"

"Of course!" Melanie answers, and finds herself wrapped in a surprisingly strong hug from this near-stranger, who then moves to hug Freddie in greeting, too.

"It's so *weird* to see them side by side," Robbie comments from the couch, looking over at Sam and Melanie.

"Yeah, it's a bit of a contrast," Beck says mildly. He lifts his hand in greeting. "Freddie," he says casually, then, "Hi, I'm Beck," to Melanie, formally, but very politely.

"Melanie. It's nice to meet you."

"Well, I was up early, so..." he nudges Robbie. "Ready to get going?"

Robbie agrees, and they exchange goodbyes. Melanie notices the way Robbie's hand lingers on Freddie's shoulder as he leaves.

"Well," Carly says briskly. "You must be tired from traveling. And from all the finals."

"I know I am," Cat agrees.

"I'll show you to my apartment," Carly tells them. Freddie and Melanie are going to be staying at Carly's studio apartment while Carly stays with Sam and Cat. But before she leads them out the door, she gives them both a pained look. "Make yourselves at home, just, please don't have sex in my bed."

Freddie turns red and can't seem to make his mouth work. Melanie chuckles. "We'll behave ourselves," she promises.

Carly leads them to her apartment and gives them her spare key. "Towels are on the bed, you can use any soaps or anything in the shower if you don't have your own. I have, like, basic breakfast foods. Eat whatever you want. Or if you're not up too early, come to Sam and Cat's apartment, the pickings might be better there."

"Thank you for letting us stay in your home, we really appreciate it," Melanie tells her gratefully.

“Yeah, thanks,” Freddie adds. “You always take care of me when I come to town.”

“Of course I do. Because we want you to *come back*.” Carly pulls him into a one-armed hug. “Goodnight, you guys.”

She and Freddie shower and get ready for bed, but Melanie’s not really tired. She’s beginning to realize with a sort of tingling eagerness, that she’s about to have a sleepover with her boyfriend for the first time. Maybe this is much more common for everyone else (obviously it is, since no one thought anything of her and Freddie sharing a bed), but it isn’t something they’ve done. Not only do they rarely have privacy in either of their dorm rooms, but Melanie has no interest in trying to squish together on a twin bed. She gets too hot in her sleep for that.

But here, they’ll be sharing Carly’s queen bed. Plenty of room.

When she comes out of the bathroom after brushing her teeth, Freddie is standing in the middle of the room, looking worried. “I can sleep on the couch if you’ll be more comfortable,” he offers.

Melanie shakes her head. “Don’t be silly. We can handle...that,” she gestures toward the bed. It looks inviting in a way that makes her knees feel a bit weak.

Freddie gazes at her with warm eyes and a slight smile. “Do you think Carly would consider fingering to be sex?” he asks in a low voice.

Melanie tries to speak, but at first no sound comes out. She clears her throat. “I don’t know,” she answers, but then, she considers the fact that Carly is a queer woman in a relationship with two women, and amends, “Yes. I think she would.”

“Yeah, you’re right,” Freddie replies. He steps toward her and rests his hands on her waist. A jolt of thrill runs through her. She doesn’t know if it’s arousal or fear. “She only said it couldn’t happen in her bed,” he notes.

Melanie kisses him, identifying her growing feeling of agitation as arousal.

When it comes down to it, Melanie doesn’t want to violate *any* of her friend’s furniture, so Freddie ends up pinning her against the wall, his hand between her legs, and the excitement and taboo of it all brings her to orgasm, something he isn’t always successful at doing, because Melanie isn’t always successful at doing it to *herself*.

Later on, as Freddie sleeps the heavy sleep of a satisfied man behind her, spooned up close but without an arm around her so she can move away if she gets too hot, Melanie reflects on how *exciting* that feeling of *wrongness* was. How she doesn’t feel like she *technically* violated any of Carly’s boundaries, but that she’d obeyed the letter of the law rather than the spirit. Carly probably wouldn’t be *thrilled* to know what had happened against her wall (the thought of it still makes Melanie feel warm but anxious, a mix of gratitude and guilt), but Melanie can’t say she’s very sorry they got away with it.

She kind of wants to do it again.

Maybe locking away the beast inside herself makes it spill out in other ways. Melanie isn't sure she likes this side of herself.

Or maybe, despite all her efforts, deep down she's still just a Puckett, who thinks the only rules worth obeying are the ones they personally like.

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The next day, Saturday, is spent getting ready for Sunday, when they're all going up to a rented cabin in the mountains north of the city. They'll be staying for four nights, through the full moon, as a big group. This means packing, shopping for groceries and drinks and weed, figuring out where to buy firewood; essentially, they're prepping for a mini vacation.

Beck is paying for the bulk of the rental, since he has the most money, while everyone else has chipped in to cover a smaller portion. In exchange, since the rent is for a full week, everyone else is expected to clear out after the full moon, leaving Beck and Robbie to enjoy the cabin on their own for a few more nights. Though it's Beck's money, Spencer is the one who actually technically secured the rental, to get around age limits. Some places don't want to rent to a crowd of college students, which Cat supposes makes sense. She imagines if they had to disclose the werewolf activity that they'd be even less likely to secure a rental.

Spencer had a blast using Beck's money to get a rental in his name. He'd pretended he was on Beck's management team, like he was on a secret mission to secure a very discreet location for his famous client to be able to take some time off. In reality, of course, discretion is quite important to the group, and the location they've selected reflects that, but it has less to do with Beck's fame than with the activities that are going to occur under the full moon.

For her part, Cat mostly focuses on making sure there's going to be enough food for Sam to get through the next half week or so. Not just meals, but snacks, and lots of protein because of the change. Everyone is responsible for bringing food, but Cat and Carly make a special effort to anticipate every eventuality as they shop for and pack up food, not just for Sam, but for the whole group. Of course, there are grocery stores in the little mountain town of Wrightwood, but the preference is, naturally, to just spend time in the cabin with friends and not have to run errands.

In the end, they have a giant cooler full of food and several bins besides, which necessitates them taking Nona's car on the trip instead of Carly's Vin Diesel, which Sam complains about, but she's not about to sacrifice food over style.

"Maybe you could ride with Freddie and Melanie and then we might be able to fit everything into Vin Diesel's back seat," Carly suggests.

"Ugh. No," Sam answers. "We'll take Nona's car," she decides reluctantly. In the end, though, she ends up riding her motorcycle, because even Nona's car's roomy back seat ends up not leaving a lot of room for Cat once everything is packed up. Sam seems perfectly content to ride by herself. Maybe it's a good opportunity for her. She rarely gets to ride very far since Cat, Carly and Sam go most places as a group, and when Sam works with Dice, she has to carry supplies and product that require a car. A couple hours on the road by herself is probably good for Sam's state of mind.

Probably because of all the supplies people are taking, which fill up trunks and backseats of sedans, carpooling is not much of an option for anyone. Really the only timeline stipulation is that Spencer has to be the one to pick up the keys at the rental office in town, so the rest of them can't do much until he arrives.

Because she's on a motorcycle, Sam arrives first, something she complains about over text to Cat as Carly drives. It's wild how quickly the scenery changes as they leave the dry flatlands of the Los Angeles basin and travel up into the forested mountains. The windows are very cool to the touch, and patches of moisture start to appear on the windshield down by the vents. When she's not fielding texts from the group about ETAs, about when Spencer will have the keys, about Sam's boredom, she's looking out the window, marveling to Carly about the scenery.

"I wonder if it'll snow while we're up here!" Cat suggests excitedly. She knows it snows in the mountains near the city; they can often see the snow-capped peaks from certain parts of the city starting in the fall.

"I kind of hope not. Just because I don't want to drive in it," Carly replies. "It *would* be beautiful, though."

"It would," Cat sighs.

By the time they make it to the cabin, Spencer and Sam are already there. They drive up a long driveway to a sprawling two-story house with a wrap-around porch, isolated on its own large plot of land with tall ponderosas and aspens along with smaller shrubs and trees among arid landscaping.

Inside, there's a rustic living room with thick leather furniture, a TV and a fireplace on adjacent walls. It's fairly large, with a high ceiling, though it'll seem much smaller when they're all there. Cat supposes the decor is why this place can advertise itself as a cabin. The exterior looks more like a summer home, but the wood paneling and animal heads mounted over the stone fireplace really lends the place a mountain retreat-style charm.

The kitchen, as well as the adjacent dining room, is spacious, with nice appliances. There are six bedrooms, two with king beds, three with queens, and one that's basically a rec room in the lower level of the house with a pool table, a ping pong table, a double bed shoved into one corner and a row of twin beds up on a loft. They'd already kind of decided who would have which room based on the photographs; the couples and the triad are all getting private rooms, except for Sinjin and Burf, who assure everyone that they don't need a private room and prefer to sleep apart. Cat isn't exactly sure what their relationship is, except that they seem to be some kind of quasi-couple. A quasi-couple who don't mind sharing a rec room that doubles as a bedroom with Carly's brother, a high schooler, and an MMA fighter. Of the two bedrooms with king-sized beds, Sam, Cat, and Carly will obviously need one, and Beck and Robbie will be taking the other one. The rest of the private rooms are basically up for grabs as people arrive.

As the afternoon turns to evening, the group arrives, car by car, taking bags to bedrooms and filling the kitchen with food. Cat and Carly take over the task of organizing the food, while Melanie watches, particularly interested in where her vegetarian items are going to end up,



right alongside Sam, who wants to know where *every* food item can be found in the future. It's kind of funny to observe the contrast in the twins, Melanie sitting up with good posture, expression bright and cheerful, chatting amiably with Cat and Carly, while Sam slouches, already digging into a package of beef jerky, seeming to ignore everyone around her completely, though her eyes track the movements of certain foods lazily, like a cat watching prey it isn't sure it has the energy to chase.

The only other person lingering in the kitchen is Jade, who is grimacing over a cup of k-cup coffee, and doesn't seem very keen to chat.

When it's dark out, they make a bonfire in the firepit in the backyard with the firewood Goomer bought in town. Sam has the most experience starting fires (well, aside from Spencer, but Cat gathers that he doesn't exactly make them intentionally), and walks everyone through how to do it. Melanie seems particularly interested in trying to learn. Cat doesn't know if she's just trying to bond with her sister, or if she just has an unexplored interest in campcraft. Still, she's not the only one; Jade takes a keen interest in the process of starting a fire, but knowing Jade, she's probably trying to figure out how to incorporate a bonfire gone wrong into her next movie.

Once the fire is blazing, they cook hotdogs (or veggie dogs) over it, accompanied with appetizers of about sixteen different bags of potato chips to choose from and s'mores for dessert. There are also coolers full of drinks and a pipe full of Andre's potent weed moving among the friend group (though they all take special care to keep anything illicit out of Dice's hands).

"So not fair," Dice mutters. "You guys were probably doing all this in high school, too."

"Yeah, but now we're older and wiser and know how dumb we were back then," Sam replies, ruffling his hair. "Just as dumb as you are now." Dice is not amused, but he doesn't push the issue.

Maybe it's because it's chilly out—distinctly colder than it tends to get in the city. Or maybe it's because humans have always been drawn to a community around the fire, which Cat remembers learning about more through stories than in any history class. But unlike parties at Beck's and Tori's, there's less activity, less dancing around and talking over each other. The mood is much more subdued as they all sit together beneath a nearly-full moon on a crisp winter night and roast marshmallows, or toss a stick into the flames just to see what will happen.

"This place is great," Carly tells Beck. "How'd you find it?"

Beck shrugs. "Just asked around for a discreet place to hang out with some friends. My coworker didn't suggest this exact location, but he said to look around here, so I did."

"Yeah, it's really great," Trina drawls bitterly. "If you're not sleeping in a *closet*."

"Hey, it'll be alright," Andre soothes her. They'd been the last couple to arrive because they'd taken a wrong turn somewhere, and had ended up with the smallest bedroom, one that

is little more than a bed and an end-table shoved into a space about the size of a walk-in closet.

“Thanks for letting us have the master bedroom,” Cat tells Beck.

“Rub it in, why don’t you,” Trina mutters.

Beck shrugs. “Well, Sam made a good point that there’s three of you, you might need a little extra room.”

Robbie leans over and whispers to Cat, “That, and Beck likes the other room because of that *big* mirror right across from the king-size bed,” he smirks. Cat blushes at the images that flood her mind.

“Kinda can’t wait for tomorrow,” Tori comments, gazing up at the moon.

“Yeah, it’ll be nice to have a space that feels safe and private enough for us all,” Sam agrees.”

“I’m just excited to *finally* change with you guys,” Robbie enthuses. “I can’t *believe* this whole time you all knew about each other and I didn’t!”

“I guess sometimes there’s a lot we don’t know about our friends,” Cat says wistfully. She’s thinking about how lonely and sad it must’ve felt for Robbie, but also, of various times she’d felt out of the loop. Of how Tori and Jade had started dating and didn’t tell her, even though she considered them both her best friends. Of how Sam had been afraid to tell her she was a werewolf, or to tell her she still had feelings for Carly. Cat is well aware that her track record with secrets is not the best, and she knows that people often keep secrets for very good reasons, reasons like safety, and maintaining relationship harmony, and the need for time and space. But Cat also knows that it hurts sometimes to be left out. Maybe that’s why she’s always struggled with secrets.

To her surprise and suspicion, though, Robbie looks away guiltily at Cat’s remark. Her heart sinks.

But it’s Freddie who speaks up, “Uh, speaking of secrets,” he begins awkwardly. Melanie reaches over and squeezes his knee, a supportive gesture, smiling at him encouragingly. “I guess I have something I want to open up about that only a few of you know.”

“You better not have knocked up my sister, Fredward,” Sam threatens immediately.

Melanie turns *bright* red, a shade that Sam rarely ever turns, emphasizing the distinction between them. “Oh, my gosh, no, nothing like that,” she assures her twin quickly.

“Oh,” Sam subsides, then looks back at Freddie, “Well, then, come on, spill.”

Freddie looks a bit like the wind has been knocked out of his sails. Finally, he says in an off-handed tone, “I’m bisexual.”

Sam laughs, but then stops herself. “Wait, for real?”

“Shocking,” Jade drawls sarcastically.

“That’s so great, Freddie!” Cat encourages.

“Thanks,” Freddie replies with a smile.

“Wait, all this time and you never told Carly and me?” Sam says, clearly surprised.

“Actually,” Carly admits, “he did tell me.”

Sam blinks at her, then looks at Cat, who shakes her head to indicate she didn’t know. Sam turns back to Freddie with a hard look. “Right. I see.”

“Hey, this was really hard for him,” Melanie defends Freddie. “He was ashamed for a long time. His first attempt at coming out didn’t go well.”

Cat notices the way Spencer winces at this, but maybe it’s just a trick of the firelight flickering over his face. Besides, she’s more concerned with Sam’s agitation.

“Besides, it’s not like you and Carly were very forthcoming about *certain things*,” Freddie shoots back. “I had to find out you two were werewolves *years* after everyone else knew!”

“Except me and Beck,” Robbie adds helpfully, but then shrinks when he realizes his commentary isn’t welcome.

“Okay, we really don’t need to fight about this,” Carly starts, placing a hand on Sam’s back. Cat can see that it is less a soothing hand and more of a warning hand as she curls her fingers in Sam’s hair, as if she’s about to tug it.

“I’m not trying to fight.” Sam takes a deep breath. “Just. *Jesus*, Freddie. Sometimes you just make me want to strangle you.”

Freddie laughs humorlessly, “Oh, believe me, the feeling is mutual.”

“All right,” Spencer throws up his hands, “Fine, yes, I admit it, I’m bisexual, too.” He gives an exaggerated shrug.

“Wait, *what?*” Now Sam is really shocked. But unlike with Freddie, she doesn’t seem angry at Spencer.

“Sometimes things are private,” Spencer tells Sam. “Don’t hold it against Freddo.”

“I’m not!” Sam insists, in a tone that suggests she knows better.

“Now, that one’s a little more surprising,” Jade comments, looking at Spencer curiously. Tori elbows her in the side, looking worriedly at Sam.

“Well, maybe this will cheer you up, Sam,” Robbie says gamely. “Turns out, you, Cat, and Carly are *not* the only open relationship at this fire circle,” he discloses proudly.

Sam stares. “So, you mean...you and Beck?”

“Precisely!” Robbie claps his hands.

“I always *knew* you’d rather not be tied down,” Jade accuses Beck.

“That’s not fair,” Beck frowns. “My arrangement with Robbie is *very* different from anything that went on in our relationship.” But Jade levels him with a superior look, like she has him all figured out.

“Technically, my relationship with Freddie is open, too,” Melanie pipes up. Freddie looks at Sam warily, as if bracing himself for another outburst. Cat wonders if Melanie decided to be the one to say it to save Freddie from exactly that.

Maybe it’s because Carly’s hand is still on her hair, but Sam behaves. “Oh, yeah?” she asks. “Do tell,” she invites tensely.

“I only want one partner,” Melanie explains. “I wouldn’t have time for anyone else, anyway. But Freddie is also seeing Robbie. And I’m perfectly okay with it,” she adds quickly, as if anticipating she’ll need to.

“Who here is *not* shocked?” Jade asks, raising her hand. Half the circle seems to ignore her, but Tori, Andre, Cat, Carly, and, for some reason, Sinjin, all raise their hands.

“Damn,” Spencer breathes. “You really won the girlfriend lottery!” he tells Freddie.

“I know it,” Freddie smiles.

Sam seems to be taking all this in, but slowly, her frown begins to fade, and she smiles. “You know what?” she says to Freddie. “Good for you. I get it now.”

“You get...what?” Freddie asks.

“I see how you all fit together. I see how it works. And you must be doing something right if my sister wants anything to do with you.”

Melanie sits up straighter and gives Sam a hard look. “If you’re implying that I should be homophobic to my boyfriend—”

“No, why would you take it there?” Sam asks harshly. “That’s not what I meant. I meant he must’ve done something right to *deserve* you.”

“Oh,” Melanie replies, looking flattered. “He did,” she reports.

The group is silent for a moment, sipping on drinks. Andre sparks up a joint and begins to pass it around.

Finally, Dice speaks up. Cat had almost forgotten he was there, partly because where he is in the circle is hard for her to see. “Is it okay if I’m just...straight?” he wonders.

“Yeah, of course it is,” Sam replies immediately. “You do you.”

“It’s not like you’re the only straight one here,” Cat assures him. “There’s Goomer, Trina, Andre...”

“Me,” Melanie adds.

“We’re...*mostly* straight,” Sinjin gestures to himself and Burf. That just makes Cat more confused. Maybe they’re each other’s gay exceptions? That would be cute.

Andre bobs his head back and forth. “I think I count,” he replies.

Trina looks surprised. “What do you mean you think you count?”

“I just mean I’m straight, but like, if the right guy came along, I’d like to think I’d be open to it, that’s all,” Andre replies.

“Well, you’d better not be ‘open to’ anyone else anytime soon,” Trina says fiercely.

“Don’t worry,” he squeezes her.

“Man, I can’t wait to grow up,” Dice mumbles idly. It’s funny, Dice has always seemed older than he is to Cat. Probably because he’s always had some hustle for cash going on, ever since she’d met him. She knows from listening to her friends that when werewolves start changing, they often begin to be treated like adults by their parents and other wolf adults in their lives, but at the same time, Dice is still a kid in high school. He occupies that awkward space of being a child in one world and an adult in another. Meaning, he’s given the independence to do whatever he wants on the nights of the full moon, including hanging out with a group of mostly college kids, and the freedom to engage in his entrepreneurial pursuits, but, he still has to go to school, he still only has a learner’s permit, and he still can’t vote or buy weed, or even sneak drinks at a private cabin among friends.

“I can’t wait, either,” Goomer comments sadly. No one seems to know what to say to that. But then he smiles. “Just kidding. I’m a grown-up.”

Several groans from the circle at this. Dice pats his shoulder. “You really had us going there, buddy,” he says dryly.

The circle is quiet again for a moment. Cat finds herself gazing into the flames, mind wandering. There’s only one semester of college left. What’s going to happen after that?

But before she can get too deep into her ruminations, she hears Carly say, “Uh oh.”

“What?” Sam asks her. Cat looks past Sam to see Carly’s shoulders lifting rhythmically, then she starts swaying a little bit.

“Uh oh,” she repeats, swaying toward Sam.

“Oh, shit,” Sam replies. Her own shoulders start to bob.

“I think I’m being taken over by—” Carly begins.

“Random dancing!” she and Sam say in unison.

In moments, they’re on their feet, jerking and shimmying around, laughing.

Spencer is next, rotating his arms in a silly way as he gets to his feet, giving Freddie a hard nudge as he does so. Then, Andre is quick to start playing music on his phone, giving everyone something to dance to, and he holds out a hand to invite Trina to dance with him. She gives him a highly unamused look in response, but as others in the circle finally start getting to their feet and dancing, she relents.

Cat is already on her feet, dancing with her partners, who are both somehow managing almost rhythmless movements as they flail around. Robbie is doing something resembling the Snoopy Dance, Beck is mostly just bobbing his head, Tori and Jade are laughing in each other’s arms, Andre is dancing behind Trina in a way that almost makes Cat want to cover Dice’s eyes, but Dice is showing off his moves, Goomer is shadowboxing, Sinjin, Burf and Spencer are all doing disco moves, and Freddie and Melanie sway slowly with their arms around each other, an amusing but sweet contrast to the bass-heavy dance track that Andre is blasting from his phone.

Eventually, Beck jogs into the cabin and gets a portable bluetooth speaker, and Andre’s music gets louder. They keep it low enough so as not to bother neighbors—though they aren’t that close by, they do exist, and the less scrutiny they have on their gathering, the better—but the party atmosphere is abruptly in full swing.

After a few minutes, Robbie drifts over to Cat.

“So,” Cat says to him. “You and Freddie, huh?”

Robbie ducks his head a bit. “Yeah,” he answers through a smile. “I really like him.”

“Well, yeah, we’ve all known that since you two met,” Cat tells him.

“Yeah,” Robbie replies softly. He’s still not quite meeting her eyes. “I’m sorry that I didn’t tell you about him, back when it happened.”

Cat blinks. She’d been thinking about secrets, and how much it hurts to be left out, but as soon as Robbie apologizes, she realizes, it doesn’t matter. There were reasons. Robbie and Freddie had a right to their privacy.

Not everything has to be everyone’s business. The fact that this group is trying to find someplace private to get away for a few days is proof of that.

“I understand,” she tells him. “You don’t have to explain anything. Except...how’d it happen?” she asks eagerly.

Robbie grins broadly, “Well, when he and Melanie broke up briefly one semester, I asked him to be my wingman at a party...”

Cat listens as Robbie finally tells the story of how he made a connection with Freddie and is reminded of how secrets are a privilege, and how lucky they all are to have one another's trust.

Much later on, after the fire turns to embers that Sam douses with buckets of water to ensure no hot coals remain, people start turning in, buzzing from weed or alcohol or sugar or all three. It's still not extremely late; it's just that even with the fire, it started to feel pretty damn cold out there.

Cat follows her girlfriends into their bedroom, where a giggling Carly kisses Sam against the door, then turns and tugs Cat to her to kiss her as well.

"We should brush our teeth," Cat suggests.

"You're right." Carly tugs Sam along to the adjoined bathroom, even though she groans in protest.

They take turns at the sink and the mirror, and by the time Cat finishes in the bathroom, Sam and Carly are already stretched out on the bed together, Carly on top of Sam, hands wandering over her torso.

"Hey," Sam grins lazily at her, and Carly looks at Cat over her shoulder with a feral smile. "Come here."

"Okay," Cat giggles, joining the two of them on the big bed.

But as she kisses Sam, while Carly starts pulling her leggings off, both werewolves go still.

"What?" Cat asks, looking between them.

Carly winces. "Maybe we should have planned this better," she comments.

"Planned what?" Cat presses.

But she does hear the sound of music playing from one of the other bedrooms. Loud enough to drown out sounds of—*oh*.

"With a werewolf in each room, there's not much privacy," Sam notes, amused. But her expression is as hungry as ever as she regards the women in bed with her.

"Hang on," Carly sighs, sprawling across the bed to her phone. She starts PearTunes, turns it up as high as it will go, and sticks the phone inside an empty water glass on the bedside table, where it echoes and amplifies. "How's that?"

"Good enough," Sam confirms, tugging Carly back toward the two of them.

Carly settles on top of Sam and traces Sam's lips with her fingers. "Maybe we can't be as *loud* as we want," she drawls seductively. "But I'm sure we can find ways to keep each other quiet." She shoots a searing look over at Cat.

“Trust me, we can,” Cat agrees, leaning over to kiss her.

Cat is untroubled by any sounds of amorous couplings going on in the cabin, and by the singular focus of her lovers on her and each other, it seems that they’ve successfully drowned out any distracting sounds.

Still, there are a few awkward moments over coffee in the morning, so Cat surmises the overall success was...mixed.

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Goomer has never really had a problem getting along with other people. It’s usually other people who have a problem getting along with him. As such, he doesn’t have a lot of close friends. He seems to confuse people. He’s not sure why, because he tends to be very straightforward about things, but people rarely expect other people to be honest, he’s realized.

Bringing Dice on as his manager has been one of the best moves he’s ever made, both professionally and personally. He may have been skeptical, because Dice had been barely out of elementary school when he’d taken on Goomer as a client, but the kid is better than most adults Goomer has worked with. He’s smart, creative, and willing to give a hundred percent. Just seeing that from Dice makes Goomer feel like he could be the same way.

And, personally, it might be a bit unorthodox, but Dice has done more for him in the name of friendship than most other people. Maybe he’s just protecting his investment. But it feels more friendly than that. Everything from helping him find his lucky t-shirt to sticking up for him when he thought Rita Rooney was bullying him. And also, among his other dietary and vitamin regimens, Dice helps him remember to take his wolfsbane. It helps him to keep his aggression for fights, and it keeps him from destroying the furniture in his apartment. Not intentionally. It’s just that Goomer is a *big* wolf.

Of course, by now, Goomer knows Sam and Cat quite well, and even Carly at this point. But a lot of these other people are pretty new. He’s seen Tori and Jade at Shadow Creek Park once or twice, and Spencer. But he doesn’t know them very well, and everyone else he really doesn’t know at all.

He’s glad that Dice has started letting him transform again, though. And as long as he keeps performing well in his fights, Dice won’t worry about him expending too much energy as a wolf. Goomer feels better as a wolf than he does as a man sometimes. It’s just *easier*.

It might feel weird to be one of the oldest people here among mostly people in their early twenties, but Goomer is used to getting along with younger people, like Dice. But he feels a kinship with Spencer, who seems to be about his age, and who seems to be more comfortable with this crowd, himself.

He and Spencer have met as wolves once or twice, but they really haven’t spoken much, even though they’re sharing a room with the other guys. All they’ve really talked about is that Goomer is a bit too tall for the twin beds on the loft—a problem Spencer also has, which is why he took the double bed. Goomer had ended up sleeping on one of the rec room couches, which suited him just fine, and he fell asleep humming along to the music coming from the



other bedrooms, grateful that it's drowning out the sounds he knows must be happening, because that probably means Dice won't hear anything that scars him for life.

After lunch on the first day of the full moon, Goomer approaches Spencer to try to get to know him better. "So," he asks him, "Do you fight?"

Spencer looks taken aback. "Sorry?"

"I'm an MMA fighter," Goomer informs him.

Spencer nods. "Right, I've heard that."

"I was just wondering if you fight. Because when we're wolves, you're about the only one who can take me."

Spencer runs a hand through his hair. "I'm not much of a fighter," he admits. "I'm more of an...artist?"

"Oh." Goomer has never really understood art. He's disappointed. But he tries to be polite. "That's cool."

"But fighting sounds—great!" Spencer says encouragingly. "Um, my sister was almost a fighter. She took on Shelby Marx?"

Goomer has heard of her, of course. She's mostly a boxer, though he's heard she's dabbled in MMA, but they're in vastly different weight classes. Not someone he's going to go up against. "Really?" he asks, looking over at Carly.

"Yup," Spencer nods. "I think she won on a technicality," he admits. "But still!"

"Good for her!" Goomer replies, meaning it. "So what do you art?" he asks.

"Oh, uh, sculpture," Spencer says. He launches into some explanation that kind of goes right over Goomer's head. But then, art isn't his thing.

"Cool," he says anyway, to be polite.

"So, what do you do when you're not fighting?" Spencer asks him.

"I train," Goomer replies. "What do you do when you're not doing art?"

"Um, I like to play *World of Warlords*?" Spencer says, tone suggesting he's wondering if Goomer has heard of it.

Goomer has. But he's never played it. "Oh. Cool."

"I also like to watch TV," Spencer adds.

"Ohh, like what?"

"You know. *Celebrities Underwater*. Stuff like that."

“I like that show!” Goomer drawls, excited to have finally found a connection with Spencer.

But once they’ve talked about the show, they can’t figure out what else to talk about.

“Well, tonight is gonna be fun,” Goomer says finally, not knowing what else to say.

Spencer pats him on the shoulder. “I’ll wrestle ya,” he promises.

And when the sun starts to set, they head to different corners of the yard to strip, while most other wolves get ready in their bedrooms, and when the change happens, Spencer’s silvery gray wolf approaches him right away. Goomer wags his tail, excited to see the hulking beast.

And before most of the other wolves have made it out of the house, they’re already playing.

And maybe that’s enough. Maybe it’s okay that they both have friends who are younger than they are, but can’t seem to find common ground with each other.

Under the full moon, they have all the common ground they need.

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While the wolves romp and play in the property’s large yard, Jade sits up on the patio furniture on the porch with many of the other humans, plus Trina and Melanie, who haven’t changed with the others. She gave Tori some pets and scratches when she’d first changed, but she could tell Tori was itching to seek out and play with all the other wolves, so she let her go. She’d almost immediately danced up to Sam and nipped playfully at Dice and then spent a long moment sniffing Robbie, both their tails wagging forcefully.

There’s an outdoor heater next to the table most of them are sitting at, meaning there’s no need for a bonfire tonight; without Sam’s guidance, it had seemed like it might be a waste of time, anyway. Besides, no one wanted a playful wolf to somehow accidentally wrestle into it, even though their burns would heal when the change happened at dawn. It didn’t seem like a likely scenario, but the more paranoid among them could picture it easily.

Cat is next to her, watching the wolves and giggling. “They’re having a great time!” she enthuses. Indeed, they seem to be playing some version of tag, although the wolves seem to be easily distracted. Robbie peels off from the group when he sees Beck down in the yard holding a dish towel, and the two of them start playing tug of war with it. One of the brown wolves is jumping up on Andre like she’s trying to dance with him. Jade squints. “Is that Tori or Carly?” she asks. The yard is shadowy, and they’re far away, so it’s harder to distinguish.

“Tori, I think,” Cat replies as she, too, watches. “Because I think Carly is over there trying to catch Dice.” She points. It seems that Carly must be “it” in the game of werewolf tag, but Dice, who is a small wolf with reddish fur, is quite agile, and is successfully keeping out of her reach.

“His coat color is beautiful,” Melanie comments.

Trina makes a harumphing sound, then looks askance at Melanie. “What color is your fur?” she asks her.

Melanie blinks. “It’s been a long time, but I’m pretty certain I look just like Sam.” She points at her golden-hued sister, who is taunting Carly, tail wagging.

“Rub it in, why don’t you,” Trina scowls.

“I’m sorry?” Melanie sounds taken aback.

Jade can’t help but chuckle to herself. “Trina wishes she looked *just like* Tori,” she smirks, remembering Trina’s complaints about her coat color in comparison to Tori’s.

But Trina just rolls her eyes. “Please. The world could not handle *two* of me.” This is not what Jade was implying at all, and she opens her mouth to say something, but Trina beats her to it, giving Jade a judgmental once-over. “Besides, Tori would be *so* out of your league if she was as hot as me.”

Jade snorts. Cat elbows her subtly, so Jade behaves. “Yeah, I’ll count my blessings,” she drawls.

“It’s cute the way Andre likes to play with them,” Melanie comments, watching Andre throw sticks for Tori and Spencer.

Trina looks unimpressed. “Well, he can’t be perfect,” she says irritably.

“Yeah, having a sense of fun is *such* a drawback,” Jade says sarcastically.

“Oh, hush, you had your chance with him!” Trina shoots back.

“...What?” Jade asks, baffled.

“I know about his crush on you,” Trina reveals. Jade wracks her brain before remembering vaguely some confession from high school about a crush and a song because Andre felt guilty for liking her when she was seeing Beck. “And I’m just saying, you could’ve had the sexiest man in the world, but you missed your chance. Now he’s mine.”

“Well, considering I think *your sister* more than makes up for it in the sexy depart—”

“I don’t need to hear this!” Trina says sharply.

“Aww, look at Freddie,” Cat says, clearly trying to break the tension. He’s down standing next to Beck, who hands him the dish towel, and he starts to play with Robbie instead. Jade can hear Robbie’s playful growls as he shakes his head, trying to yank the towel out of Freddie’s hands—and very nearly succeeds a few times.

Beck appears to be watching them placidly, but Jade has to wonder if he’s jealous. They’d talked a little bit last night, as Beck tried to explain to her that openness isn’t his preference, but it’s what makes sense for him and Robbie when they’re apart most of the time. Though she’d gotten Beck to concede that sleeping around isn’t really something someone who *doesn’t* enjoy an open relationship would do, and he’d admitted that he isn’t exactly thrilled that Robbie has feelings for Freddie, even though Freddie is the only other person Robbie

sleeps with. She wonders if seeing them interact when Robbie is a werewolf—something else that for a long time was a secret only shared with Beck—invokes a similar kind of jealousy.

“They are cute,” Melanie agrees.

Trina scrutinizes her. “You’re jealous, aren’t you?” she accuses conspiratorially.

“No, I’m not,” Melanie insists.

“Come on,” Trina scoffs.

“Not everybody gets that jealous,” Cat reminds Trina. “Sometimes, people get horny instead.” She laughs.

“Okay, time to cut you off,” Jade says, taking the rest of Cat’s hard lemonade from her and immediately drinking from it. Cat pouts.

“It’s not that either,” Melanie mumbles. Her voice gets a little stronger as she says, “There are things Freddie can get from Robbie that he can’t get from me. And one of those things is...a wolf.”

Before anyone can comment about what *else* Robbie might be giving Freddie—and Jade certainly has a response on the tip of her tongue—Sinjin calls, “All right! Who’s next?”

Goomer, who had been patiently allowing Sinjin and Burf to take measurements of his wolf form under the porch lights, bounds away among the other wolves. “What a specimen,” Burf says admiringly.

“Fantastic coat,” Sinjin agrees. Privately, Jade agrees. Goomer is an almost blindingly white wolf, his size and color making him appear almost ghostly as he flits around the yard.

Spencer heads over to Sinjin and Burf, tail wagging, and Burf begins to take a measuring tape to him, relaying numbers to Sinjin, who notes them on his PearPad. Cat giggles. “It’s like they’re measuring him for a suit! Wouldn’t he be cute in a tuxedo for wolves?”

“Adorable,” Jade drawls, but she’s been thinking about what Melanie said about Robbie. No, not about the part where Freddie and Robbie fuck, but the other part, the part she’d been wondering about since she’d heard Sam lightly berate her sister for not changing with them. “So, wait,” she asks Melanie, “Why don’t you change?”

Melanie doesn’t answer right away, and Jade is just about to amend that Melanie doesn’t have to answer if it’s too personal. Something about Melanie makes her feel like she has to mind her manners. It’s weird to be around someone who looks so much like Sam but who she realizes she can’t tease like she teases Sam. But Melanie answers slowly, “It’s been so long that it’s kind of a habit?” she replies thoughtfully. “I hadn’t thought much about it in a long time. But I guess in part it’s that I don’t feel like it’s worth my time. I have other things to do, I have other ways of getting out my restless energy.” She shrugs. “It just...doesn’t feel like me.”

“I agree completely,” Trina says seriously.

Jade can't help it; she laughs. "Please, the reason *you* don't change is because you don't like your coat color."

"That's *part* of it!" Trina retorts with a glare. "But also, like, what's the big deal? Who cares if I don't want to run around like some fool in a stranger's yard? I have better things to do."

"Like...sitting around talking to us while your boyfriend plays fetch with your sister," Jade smirks.

"The man has to have *some* flaws to make up for me not having any!" Trina insists. "It just so happens his is an *inexplicable* desire to hang out with fuzzbrains."

"He's probably just making up for the fact that he doesn't get to see them much, since you don't change," Cat suggests, clearly trying to cover for Andre for the fact that he comes to Shadow Creek Park with them fairly regularly.

Trina laughs. "Oh, please. I know he goes on your weird werewolf escapades with you almost every month. He can't hide that from me."

Cat laughs unconvincingly. "What? That's crazy!"

"I can't imagine *why* he thinks it's worth his time, but I know about it," Trina says smugly.

But Jade grins savagely. "You're jealous," she accuses.

"What? I am not. I just *said* I don't care if Andre has dumb hobbies!"

"If you don't care, why do you keep disparaging him?"

"Because I think it's *stupid*!"

Jade shakes her head. "You know what's stupid? Making your boyfriend sneak off to be away from you when you *could* just change and let him get his kicks in the privacy of your own home. He's already *seen* you as a wolf. And he's *clearly* not horrified."

They all look down at where Andre is now playing tug of war with Robbie, laughing, while Beck and Freddie watch, talking. Jade wishes she could hear what they were talking about.

Jade had almost forgotten about what she'd just said to Trina, but to her surprise, it's Melanie who says delicately, "She has a point."

"What do you know? You *share* your boyfriend!"

"And so do you. In a different way," Melanie replies, completely unfazed by Trina's sharp words.

Trina appears to be seething, stewing over what Melanie has said and clearly unhappy about it. Finally, she throws up her hands. "It's just not *fair*!" She gestures out into the yard. "Just *look* at them all! Goomer with his white fur, Robbie with his midnight *black* fur, Dice making everyone jealous with his red coat, which, where does *that* come from, the kid has darker hair

than *me*, and fuck you, Melanie, at least you get to keep something like your natural hair color when you change. I become *gray*. The most *boring* color there is, and I have to walk around, my dynamic, beautiful, wonderful, *colorful* self, the most *boring* shade there is! How is that *fair*?”

“Like you said, nobody’s perfect,” Jade teases.

“Spencer’s gray,” Cat points out.

“He’s *silver*,” Trina emphasizes, like this is a huge distinction, which, apparently, it is for her.

“I suppose I have taken for granted that my wolf form might be aesthetically pleasing,” Melanie admits. “But I also don’t think there’s anything wrong with gray.”

“I know condescension when I hear it,” Trina tells Melanie.

Melanie looks surprised and is clearly about to respond, but Jade gets in there first. “It is Trina’s primary method of communication,” she informs Melanie.

Trina sneers at Jade. But Cat sounds thoughtful, “Wait a minute,” she says slowly.

“What?” Trina asks.

“What if there was a way to make you feel more confident as a wolf?”

“You want to increase my confidence? What is this, an ad for boner pills?” Trina asks. Jade laughs. Okay, score one for Trina.

“I was just thinking about the way Sinjin and Burf are measuring everybody.”

“Right, the data for their study,” Trina says impatiently. Jade still isn’t quite sure what their “study” actually is, but everyone has agreed to participate, except the two wolves sitting in front of her.

“What if I were to make you something that you could wear as a wolf that reflects how great you are? So you wouldn’t just feel *dull* and *gray*, you could feel...*Trina*!” Cat flourishes her hands.

“Make me something?” Trina questions.

“Like a costume! Or just something you can wear!”

Jade suppresses a smirk because this sounds *ridiculous*. The last thing any of these wolves need in order to look less silly is *clothes*. But to her surprise, Trina looks genuinely interested. “You could do that?” she asks.

“Of course I can,” Cat answers without a trace of false modesty. “I’m *really* good at costumes, you know.”

Trina nods slowly. "I guess I do remember you being pretty good at that," she says reluctantly.

"I'd just have to get your measurements," Cat states. "Maybe you could change one of the other two days this month and I'll get them while we're here!"

"Ugh, and then what? Hide in my room away from everyone else and not even be able to drink? No thanks," Trina sneers. But she regards Cat thoughtfully. "Maybe next month," she suggests.

"Maybe Sinjin and Burf can measure you for their study, too!" Cat suggests.

"Or, *you* could just give them your measurements," Trina says, "So they don't have to see me."

Cat shrugs. "Whatever you want."

Freddie comes back to sit next to Melanie, slipping an arm around her and pressing a kiss to her temple. "What're you guys talking about?" he asks. Behind him, Beck and Andre are also approaching the group of regular human-shaped people.

"Trina's ego," Jade replies.

"It's nice to see Robbie fitting in," Beck comments as he gets closer. Jade glances out into the yard to see Robbie being chased by Sam, both of them playfully prancing around each other. "He was pretty nervous about being accepted among a group of wolves who already know each other."

"Um, they also already know *him*," Jade points out.

"Not all of them," Freddie supplies.

"Is that why he kept wanting to play with us?" Andre wonders, settling next to Trina. "That's cool, though, because everyone else out there was too excited about each other."

"Aww, did you not get enough playtime?" Trina teases him.

"I'm deprived, but I'll push through it," Andre says bravely, earning him a playful poke from his girlfriend.

Jade can see Beck is still watching Robbie. "He's fine," she informs Beck, to bring his attention back to the group.

Beck smiles slightly. "I know," he replies. He hesitates, then sits next to Freddie.

Jade hopes she isn't watching another triad in the making. Beck would be *insufferable* if he got to sleep with Freddie, too. Not to mention, how would Melanie feel about *that*?

She laughs softly to herself. She doesn't know how people do the open thing. She's just glad to be with someone who doesn't have a wandering eye. Or, at least, if she *does*, with the good

sense to know she doesn't have to do anything about it.

She might not be as conceited as Trina, but the way Tori makes her feel, sometimes, she worries she could get that way.



# Honor

**January 2017**

Cat has had her driver's license for a while now, but it's still rare that she goes anywhere by herself. However, she'd promised Trina that when she came to take her measurements for her wolf outfit that she wouldn't bring either of her girlfriends, or anyone else, for that matter. Privately, Cat can kind of understand why. Sam's reaction to her own twin's refusal to change form isn't exactly respectful. She would trust Carly to be more patient, but since she's convinced Spencer to start changing regularly, she'd become even more certain of the benefits of it. Cat could see her making dry comments about Trina's hesitation that would absolutely set Trina off. Watching some of the ways Trina and Jade were at each other's throats last month in the mountains had reminded Cat of how intense Trina can be, even when she's not hopped up on daily wolfsbane.

The experience at the cabin they'd rented had been *incredible*, however. It's something they all still talk about, in text threads or when they see each other in person. It's even something Cat talks about with her partners at home. Everyone seems to consider it one of the best full moon experiences any of them have ever had. The werewolves *loved* having the freedom and space to safely spend time together outside, for them all to bond and get to know each other as wolves, and to have an adjacent indoor location so that their human counterparts could stay nearby. The humans enjoyed what amounted to a long party in the mountains, and the experience of watching their delighted partners enjoy their time as wolves.

Even Trina and Melanie, who didn't change, seemed to really get something out of the experience. Cat thinks that Melanie wanted a chance to bond with Sam more than she really did, something she'd tried to nudge Sam into doing more of, but Sam didn't seem all that interested in getting closer to her sister. But Melanie seemed to really enjoy the opportunity to get to know Freddie's friends, and Cat certainly enjoyed getting to know Sam's sister. And Trina, as Tori's sister, had been kind of peripheral to their friend group for such a long time, but by the time the trip to the cabin happened, she began to feel like one of the group in a way that Cat is pretty sure she appreciated, even if she'd never expressed it.

She knocks on the door to Trina's apartment, and Burf answers. He gives her something resembling a formal bow. "Come on in," he invites.

"Thank you," Cat replies. Almost immediately, she notices Andre. "Oh. Hi!"

"Hey, Little Red," Andre replies, standing up from the couch to offer her a friendly hug.

"I didn't know you would be here," Cat states.

Andre grimaces. "Yeah, well. With Trina, sometimes you have to be a little bit flexible."

Cat nods, but then considers what this might mean. "What?" she asks.

"Just...you'd better talk to her before she actually changes," he tells her.

Ah. Cat has a sense that maybe the simple plan for her to come over and measure Trina's wolf form might be more complicated than she expected. Cat looks around. "Is she...?"

"She's in her room," Sinjin replies from the doorway to his bedroom. "Hello, Cat," he says in his slightly off-putting way.

But Cat is used to off-putting. "Hi, Sinjin!" She draws herself up to her full height—far shorter than anyone else in the room—and goes to knock on Trina's door.

"Who is it?" Trina calls.

"It's me. Cat. Can I come in?"

"Of course not! My *boyfriend* is the only one here who gets to see me naked."

"Oh. You're already undressed, huh?" Cat asks. By her estimation, there's still almost fifteen minutes before Trina will start changing.

"I'm not getting stuck in a dress like I did last time," Trina insists. "That dress was never the same afterwards, and it was a *good* dress."

"You still have time. Why not put on a robe so I can talk to you?" Cat suggests. Andre nods encouragingly behind her.

"Why do you want to talk to me?" Trina asks suspiciously.

"So we can talk about how this is going to go. I want to make sure you're comfortable."

"Of *course* I'm not comfortable," Trina says scathingly. "I'm sitting *naked* in my room waiting for something I'm not excited about in the least!"

"But I thought—" Cat frowns. "I thought you wanted me to do this for you."

"I *do*, but that doesn't mean I'm excited about changing! Once I have something *no other* wolf has, I'll feel a lot better, but until then, I *don't* want you to see me!"

"But I'll need to see you to be able to take your measurements," Cat insists. She feels stupid talking to a door.

"Oh, right. About that. I was thinking I'd just have Andre take any measurements you need. For you and for Sinjin and Burf."

Cat looks back to where Sinjin and Burf are standing in the living room. Sinjin shrugs reluctantly. "I don't like it either," he tells Cat.

Andre comes closer to the door. "Trina, I told you, I'm *really* not sure I can take the measurements the way these guys do. I don't know if it's gonna be accurate."

"Did you not take stagecraft classes at Hollywood Arts?"

“Well, of course I did, but—”

“Then you can handle a piece of measuring tape,” Trina says decisively.

Andre looks helplessly at Cat. “Of course, I’ll do my best, but...” he trails off.

Cat pats his shoulder. “I know you will.” To Trina, she warns, “If Andre messes up, it will mean the garment I make you won’t fit right.”

“I *trust* him,” Trina retorts, almost savagely. It feels more like a challenge than an expression of closeness.

“Okay,” Cat says reluctantly. “Let us know when you’re ready for Andre to come in.”

Trina doesn’t reply, and Cat moves away from her door to sit on one of the living room chairs. “I don’t get why she’s being so weird about this,” she complains to Andre in a low voice.

He tilts his head to the side sympathetically. “She’s just really uncomfortable with how she looks, I guess. I was a little afraid she was gonna rip my throat out the first time I saw her as a wolf. The first and *only* time,” he amends.

“That’s so...sad,” Cat laments. She can’t imagine what it would be like if Sam or Carly shied away from her every time they had to change, if they hid and whined and hated every bit of it.

“It is what it is,” Andre shrugs.

“You want something to drink while we wait?” Burf asks, glancing at the sky out the window. “I think it’s gonna be a minute.”

“Sure,” Cat nods, accepting a bottle of Blue Dog soda. “So...what *are* you taking measurements for?” she asks Sinjin and Burf. She was never quite clear on this last month when they’d done their work observing and cataloging the traits of their werewolf friends.

“We’re trying to determine what kinds of genetic markers impact lycanthropic traits,” Sinjin replies simply. “By studying observable traits on werewolves and comparing them to similar traits on a human, we can possibly determine which parts of the human genetic code could have specific ties to lycanthropy.”

“Oh.” Cat says. Genetics are a little beyond her scientific literacy.

“The goal is to try to discover if there’s an epigenetic marker on certain genes that are activated for lycanthropy,” Burf explains. “And then discover if there’s a way to ‘switch on’ those genes in carriers.”

“We’re not evolutionary biologists,” Sinjin admits, “So our studies are rudimentary at best. But I’m hoping that if I keep researching, I can develop a program that can use what scientists already know about the human genome and examine our results in that context.”

Cat gazes over at Andre. “Does this make any sense to you?” she asks him.

He frowns. “A little.”

“We’re learning as we go,” Burf admits.

“Well, I’m glad you were able to come to the mountains with us,” Cat says genuinely. Jade had been the only one who’d been at all reluctant to invite them to join; everyone else either were just happy to meet new people or were friendly enough with them in high school that it wasn’t an issue to have the two guys join them. But Tori had convinced Jade. Cat didn’t know *exactly* what she’d done to do so, but she can imagine a few things.

“Oh, me, too!” Burf says enthusiastically.

“Wasn’t it great?” Sinjin agrees, eyes alight with excitement.

“I wish we could afford to do it more often,” Cat sighs. “And this month, I’m missing Shadow Creek Park to be here to do this for Trina,” she laments.

Andre pats her shoulder sympathetically. He, of course, had been invited to the Park, too, but was here to support Trina. Or so Cat thought. Turns out, he’s here to actually do the measurements that Cat is supposed to do. “Even with Beck paying for half the rental, it was still a pretty good chunk of change for everyone,” he admits.

“Beck paid for *half*?” Cat asks. She’d known he’d paid a higher price point than anyone else, but she didn’t realize *just* how much more. She starts doing the mental math in her head, thinking of just how many people came that spend as much as she did, and—”Wow.”

“Yeah, it was kind of the perfect place, but I don’t think I’d be able to afford to go again for a long time,” Andre says wistfully.

“I hear you,” Cat agrees. “Babysitting pays the bills, but...” she trails off meaningfully.

“Well, we’re about to graduate soon,” Andre says optimistically. “Maybe we’ll all find some good work once we start looking for it.” At that, though, he casts an uncertain glance at Trina’s door. Cat knows that since graduating last spring, Trina has really only found work as an intern at a local theater company, and she’s frustrated that she’s not able to use most of the skills she learned in her program at this job yet. Not to mention, she’s not really being paid. It’s not ideal. It’s not what any of them might want.

It makes the future feel kind of grim.

They shift the topic back to the fun they all had in the mountains, and a few minutes later, there’s a scratch at Trina’s door, and a low bark. Andre stands up and goes to open the door, slipping inside so that no one else can see in. Cat goes to stand next to the door, listening.

“Okay, she’s here,” Andre reports.

“Here, wait, I forgot to give you this.” Cat tries the door and finds that it’s unlocked, but she respectfully only sticks her hand through the crack in the door to hand her tape measure to

Andre.

He takes it, and they close the door quickly. “Okay,” he says uncertainly. “What do you want me to measure first?”

“Let’s start with bust,” Cat decides.

“Bust...” Andre drawls. Cat can imagine him looking at Trina as a wolf, standing there in the middle of her bedroom, watching him warily.

“Whatever the widest part of her chest is,” Cat explains.

“Yeah, I think... I think it’s gonna be right about here...” Andre murmurs. “Um, maybe 38, no, hold on, 43 inches? Does that sound right?”

“I don’t know,” Cat replies. She’s never *seen* Trina as a wolf, or maybe she could eyeball an estimation of her size. She’s pretty good at that. But she supposes the range Andre offers her is consistent with what she’s seen in her other werewolf friends. “I guess so,” she says reluctantly, noting the size in her PearPhone. “How about her waist size? The narrowest point of her torso?”

Andre offers her a few more measurements that he doesn’t sound confident about. Sinjin and Burf hover behind Cat, waiting for their turn to ask questions through the door. She can hear light growls from Trina as Andre works, and it sounds to Cat like her reactions are clearly flustering him. She’s getting impatient.

“From between the shoulder blades to the base of her tail, Andre,” Cat reminds him as she waits.

“I know, I know,” he sighs. “Hang on, I’m trying to make sure the measuring tape is *tight*...”

Cat has had enough. This is frustrating, and as much as she trusts Andre to do his best, Cat just doesn’t feel confident that she can rely on his work to actually make a garment. She pushes open the door and strides in.

Andre is crouched next to Trina, and he turns and rolls off to the side in surprise as he gets to his feet. Trina immediately spins toward Cat, teeth bared, hair on the scruff of her neck standing up.

Cat isn’t intimidated. She glares at Trina. “This is stupid!” she shouts. “I’m *trying* to do a favor for you, and if you don’t let me do the work I need to do to make sure the clothes I make are even going to *fit* you, I’ll have to start all over, and I’m in my last semester of school, I don’t exactly have a ton of free time to work on this for you, *especially* not for free! So you just stand still right there and let me take the measurements I need! It’s not like I’m your *gynecologist*! You’re a *werewolf*, Trina, and you’re not the first one I’ve seen! You pretty much look like all the others! And that’s *great*! You look *lovely*, and I’m not just saying that! But you need to get over yourself if you think I’m going to cringe away from you just because you’re mostly one color and because you’re growling at me! I live with Sam, remember?”

Andre stares, wide-eyed. Slowly, Trina's lip trembles back into place covering her fangs, her body seems to relax, and she shakes herself off. She doesn't wag her tail, and she shows no indication that she's happy with this, but she stands still and allows Cat to take the measurements she needs. Andre's measurements were close, Cat will give him that. But hers are better.

"Now, are you going to let Sinjin and Burf do what they have to do, or do I have to help them?" Cat asks.

Dark hazel eyes bore into hers. Trina isn't happy. But she nods her head, just once, an awkward approximation of the human gesture.

"Thank you." Cat pats her head gently. Trina growls. Cat flits out of the room. "Your turn!" she sings at Sinjin and Burf.

"Thanks," Burf replies, sounding impressed.

Cat goes downstairs and gets into her car. Maybe she still has time to head to Shadow Creek Park. Or maybe she can just go home and start laying out plans for Trina's wolf outfit. Maybe choose some fabric swatches to send to Trina. Or maybe she could just head over to Jade's and they can hang out until it's time to go get their werewolves in the morning.

Cat smiles as she gets behind the wheel of her car. Maybe she'll never be the primary driver in her relationships, but it feels good to have the freedom to do what she wants sometimes.

## **February 2017**

Come early February, when the semester is still pretty new, Melanie thinks she's ready to take another step in her relationship with Freddie. She's been thinking about it for a while, and it feels like the right time. Maybe the only right time for a while.

She tells him the weekend before, when they go to get tea (or coffee) on Sunday afternoon and to take a walk. She steels herself. This is *huge* to her.

Freddie clearly notices that she's preoccupied. "Hey, what's up?" he asks her. "You've barely said a word since we started walking." He frowns. "Is the semester this bad already?" he asks sympathetically.

Melanie shakes her head. "No. It's not too bad, actually," she admits. "It's just—I have to tell you something."

"You can tell me anything," Freddie promises her. He smiles softly, reassuringly. She knows it's true. She *trusts* Freddie, more deeply than anybody, except maybe Sam, who she trusts in her very blood, trusts more than Sam perhaps deserves. And he trusts her in return. It's been reassuring to see the way he's accepted both her and Robbie, and the way he's changed because of them. He's taken to wearing a pin of the bisexual flag on his school bag. It's small—*very* small, actually—but she knows for Freddie it's a huge step.

Just as huge as what Melanie is considering.

She takes a breath.

“I think I’m ready,” she tells him, but stops, trying to consider how much she wants to spell it out for him.

Freddie goes still, every part except his eyes, which are blinking. “You—you are?” he asks, clearly surprised. “I—oh, my god, are you *sure*?” he asks.

Melanie nods slowly. “I care about you deeply. And I trust you. And I think it’s time to let you see that.”

“Wow. Okay, wow,” Freddie shakes his head. “Well, uh, how do you want to do this?” he asks. “Valentine’s Day?” he suggests.

“It’ll happen next weekend,” Melanie clarifies. “We’ll have to work around Robbie’s schedule, but I imagine we can do it the same way as he did.”

“Don’t worry about Robbie,” Freddie says dismissively, but he looks a bit bemused. “But—Robbie and I haven’t, uh, *done...that* yet.” He quickly adds, “Unless you’re talking about oral, is that what you meant you’re ready for?”

“Is that what I—wait, what—?” Melanie asks.

“—What did you—”

“—You thought I meant—”

“—*Oh*—”

“—*Oohhh...*” Melanie feels overheated. She can’t understand why she can’t seem to say something. “Um,” she finally manages.

“I’m—so sorry,” Freddie says sincerely. “I know you’ve said you want to wait until—I’m not trying to push for anything more, I just, I think I was just confused—”

“I didn’t express myself well enough,” Melanie finally manages. “Um, you know it’s not that I *don’t want* to do those things with you...” More than ever, since they’d started having orgasms together, Melanie has questioned her own thus far unwavering position that she isn’t going to have sex until she’s finished with college, has a job with benefits including health insurance and maternity leave, and is at least engaged. These parameters had seemed so easy back when the idea of sexual pleasure was an *abstract*, something she’d tried by herself and didn’t have much success with, when the idea of a wonderful boyfriend was a dream, not a flesh and blood person who smells incredible and whose lips taste so good that Melanie wants to taste all of him. Oral sex seems like the next logical step, but it’s *incredibly* intimidating, because it’s *so intimate*, and especially because she knows Freddie is getting plenty of it elsewhere, from someone who knows what he’s doing. And what if it’s so good that Melanie can’t resist taking things further?

The last thing Melanie wants to be is her mother. When she has sex with someone, she wants to *mean* it.

The fact that Robbie and Freddie have been taking things slowly themselves is a bit of a comfort for Melanie. It helps her feel like she's not alone in her need to delay things until she feels more secure. But she also can't deny that knowing what they're up to makes her want to...compete, a little. She plays lacrosse for a reason; Pucketts are competitive. She hasn't yet decided if it's a *good* thing that Freddie's other relationship seeks to push her out of her comfort zone, or if she needs to double down, and strictly adhere to the rules she set for herself when she was thirteen, and all that mattered to her was *not* being Pam Puckett.

But luckily, Freddie seems to understand what she means, about this dichotomy of desire. "Right. I know you want to someday. And I know you're not ready. I shouldn't have assumed."

"I can see why you did," Melanie says, thinking back on the course of the conversation.

"Okay, so...what *did* you mean?" Freddie finally asks.

Melanie shakes her head slowly. To her, this is almost as critical as having sex, but she's pretty sure it's about to be a letdown for Freddie. "I want to change. Under the full moon. And I want you to be there."

To her surprise, Freddie smiles. "Really?" he asks.

"I think it's time that I confront what I am," Melanie tells him quietly. She feels exposed at the admission, almost embarrassed at her request of Freddie, and adds quickly, "I was thinking about it last month, but the full moon was too soon after the beginning of the semester, I didn't feel ready, and besides, only one night of it fell on a weekend, and I assumed Robbie would probably be there. But next weekend it will be on Friday and Saturday, so whatever night Robbie's not going..." she trails off.

Freddie nods sincerely. "I'd be honored to accompany you," he tells her, his tone very formal.

Like a knight. Chivalrous. And with the shoulders to go with it.

Melanie's only concern with asking Robbie about his plan for the full moon is that Robbie will want to know why, and then will probably want to come with them. Melanie can say no gracefully, but sometimes a gracious, polite decline goes over the head of someone like Robbie, and Melanie is not well-practiced in firm rejections. But, she also doesn't particularly trust Freddie to handle Robbie, either, because of their mutual affection; Freddie might want him there, the way Melanie was there when Robbie changed.

This is her rite of passage, of sorts. Her existential exploration, her leap of faith when it comes to trusting Freddie with this part of her. And for that reason, she decides to handle the issue of Robbie herself. She has his number. They've been in a few group chats among the people they went to the mountains with last month.

She sends him a text.



**Hello Robbie**

**It's Melanie**

**What night are you going into the  
woods this weekend?**

He answers quickly.

**Hi Melanie!**

**I was thinking about Friday**

**Why? Did you want to come along?**

**Thank you for the offer, but no  
I'd like to have some privacy in the woods  
So if you go Friday, I'll go Saturday  
Deal?**

**Deal!**

**Whatever you're doing, hope it goes well for you!**

She can't tell if Robbie is being obtuse about what Melanie might be doing in the woods on the night of the full moon, or if he's just being polite. She also hopes that she's been clear enough about her expectations that he's not about to try to invite himself along. She knows enough to know he wouldn't do something like this just to be nosy; Robbie is well-intentioned in almost everything, as far as she's seen. He just...missteps.

A quick conversation with Freddie making it clear that she wants it to be just them, and Melanie feels better.

When Saturday rolls around, Freddie drives them to the area of woods that Robbie showed them last semester. Melanie wonders if he's gone back here with Robbie since then. She'd

never thought to ask.

“So, I’m curious,” Freddie begins. “You said that you didn’t get anything out of changing, that it didn’t feel like you. I’m wondering what changed.”

“It’s difficult to explain,” Melanie says slowly. “It’s a lot of things. But most of it came from a conversation I had last month at the cabin in the mountains.”

“Wasn’t that place amazing?” Freddie says wistfully. “I wish there was a place like that we could go to regularly.”

“It really was,” Melanie agrees. “And I think being in an environment where people were so open and accepting of werewolves, and where the werewolves were so unashamed, helped me examine my point of view. I hadn’t deeply considered until then that my feelings about being a werewolf might have been bound up in shame, but of course they are. My mother is a werewolf, and the worst kind of one, just like she’s the worst kind of mother. And Sam...as much as I love my sister, she makes very few choices that I approve of. I felt that I had to distinguish myself from the parts of my family that are...feral.”

Freddie nods slowly. “Feral seems like the right word,” he offers. “I don’t even think Sam would think I was insulting her if I said it to her face.”

Melanie chuckles. “Possibly not.”

“But you said something about a conversation?” Freddie prompts.

“Right. It was when Trina was talking with Jade, and they were talking about how Trina’s boyfriend really enjoys spending time with the werewolves, to the point that sometimes he joins his friends during the full moon, even though Trina doesn’t go. And Jade pointed out that Andre could easily spend time with a werewolf who means a lot to him, except that Trina doesn’t change, so he has to go elsewhere.”

“Uh huh,” Freddie hums slowly, prompting Melanie to continue.

“And it made me think about you and Robbie. How you two have this whole separate level of intimacy with each other that I *could* have with you, but I refuse to do it. And it made me consider whether I should change my approach.”

Freddie glances at her. “Hey, just because I do something with Robbie doesn’t mean I need to do it with you, too. I mean...that applies to more than just werewolf stuff. Which I know you know that.”

“I know,” Melanie assures him. “It’s not jealousy that’s prompting this. It’s more...I see this as an opportunity to connect with you.”

“You don’t *have* to do this for me if you don’t want to,” Freddie says gently. “Like, sure, it’s *really* cool that you can do this, but I also like having you around as a human, as someone I can talk to.”

Something distressing occurs to Melanie. “Will this change how you see me? How you feel about me?”

“No!” Freddie assures her quickly. “Not in any negative way, anyway.”

All that tells Melanie is that it’s possible Freddie will feel more positive about her. “I think that I will feel better once I know that you’ve seen me at my most...savage.”

Freddie grins. Clearly, he thinks she’s joking. But she’s not. Becoming a literal animal is the antithesis of everything she’s working for, each precise part of her image, her poise, her patience, her grace, her studiousness and kindness and courtesy and polish. It feels almost as alien as returning to her mother’s home in Seattle, like a place she doesn’t belong.

But with Freddie by her side, Melanie thinks she can come to terms with it, and at least decide if her avoidance of it for all these years is something that still makes sense for her.

Re-evaluation of decisions she made almost a decade ago seems to be a theme. Maybe it’s because she’ll be graduating in a few short months. Commencements are beginnings; what other new beginnings is Melanie in store for?

Freddie parks his car, and the two of them walk into the forest together, toward the area Robbie showed them before: off the beaten path, reasonably secluded, close to a vast stretch of natural landscape that humans tend to leave alone at night. It’s winter time, which means people aren’t lingering in the area at dusk. Melanie is certain that she and Freddie are quite alone.

Freddie gives her a reassuring smile. “It really is a nice area,” he remarks, maybe intending to encourage her. And it’s...fine, she guesses. It was around this time of year in Vermont when her mom showed up to teach her about changing, and it was *much* colder, almost unbearably so. But the woods there were *very* different, the ground crusted with snow and ice, the trees bare. The forest felt...*asleep* in a way that no land ever seems to out in California, at least, as far as Melanie’s experience goes.

She guesses she doesn’t actually have a preference, as far as the location in nature. What had made the mountains in California so special had been the camaraderie, and the accommodations for humans, with their thin skin and lack of fur.

This will do, for Melanie’s purposes, tonight.

“Right about here,” she murmurs, finding a more bare patch of ground beneath the trees. She can actually *smell* that Robbie was here last night; in all likelihood, he ended up sleeping here after spending some time exploring. She plants her feet, getting a feel of the area, settling in, assessing if she really feels safe. But she does. Oddly, even the evidence of Robbie’s recent presence provides some comfort, reassurance.

“How do you want to do this?” Freddie asks her.

Melanie closes her eyes, takes a breath. *Feels*. Sometimes it still seems so unnatural to just *exist* in her body. She’d much rather exist in her mind. But this is important. Necessary. “It’s

coming soon,” she informs Freddie. “If you’d turn away, please.”

“Of course,” he replies, turning around deliberately, so all Melanie can see is his back. She gazes at him for a long moment before she begins to undress. This is one of the parts that she doesn’t think she’ll ever get used to. It just feels so *undignified* to strip down in a forest, to find a place to tuck clothing that bugs and small animals will crawl all over it all night, to have to shake the ants out of underwear in the morning when you’re cold and naked and tired and human. Yet again, a major perk of the cabin in the mountains of California: being able to strip and change inside, and, in many cases, to have a door to the patio in the bedroom itself, so getting outside is as simple as walking through a door.

The more she looks back on her time there, the more Melanie wishes she’d just bitten the bullet and changed during that December full moon. Maybe Sam could have respected that. Maybe Melanie would have enjoyed the experience more.

But there are reasons she’d waited, and she thinks in some ways, waiting to do this with just Freddie is the right choice.

She remembers the experience with Robbie, and Freddie’s fascination with the grotesque process of transformation. How Melanie had told him *not* to look, but he’d *wanted* to, he’d *enjoyed* it.

Maybe it’s a challenge to herself, to really jump in with both feet. Maybe it’s a challenge to Freddie, to still see her as desirable after this. Or maybe it’s just her impulse to compete with Robbie, but just before her transformation takes place, Melanie tells Freddie, “You can look. If you want.”

Slowly, he turns around, and blinks at the sight of her, nude in the forest. This is the first time she’s been naked in front of him. He’s pretty much seen all of her, at different times, but she’d always skirted full nudity in sexual situations to avoid the temptation to go further than she’s ready for. She doesn’t blame him for taking her in, though he keeps his expression respectful, and keeps his eyes from lingering on one part or another. He swallows, nods, and watches her face.

It feels like a lot of pressure and expectation. Melanie closes her eyes. Within a minute, she feels a jarring sensation in her spine that seems to ripple to her abdomen. She feels her body clenching, moving independently. Shifting.

For a moment, it’s terrifying, like free-falling into the unknown, into something she’d almost entirely forgotten about. But her body knows what to do, and Melanie follows her instincts when the change forces her onto four legs. Nothing hurts, but she breathes through the experience, focusing on that, so she doesn’t have to think about all the disturbing changes that Freddie is *absolutely* watching right now. Better to forget he’s there, though with her nose, she really can’t.

It’s instinct, too, to shake herself off when the transformation is complete. She opens her eyes, startled at the way her vision changes. She’s not colorblind like actual wolves, but the scope of her field of vision changes, her ability to see in the low light of the evening forest is

elevated, and great distances are difficult to discern. Not to mention, her eyeline has dropped by a couple feet.

But as she looks around, it feels like so much simply comes *flooding* back to her.

She's a *wolf*. It's so simple, and everything about her situation abruptly feels so *natural*: to be in the forest, to hear the sounds of so many tiny creatures, to smell deer and coyote on the breeze, and to *know* that's what those creatures are, with no explanation of *how*.

She's a *wolf*. And it feels like parts of her brain have just *shut off* and let this fact, this instinct, take over.

It freaks her out.

She runs. She can hear Freddie call out in surprise, and she dashes through the trees. But she can't outrun herself. She can't force herself back into a human by tiring out the wolf that she *is*. Still, it takes several minutes of frantic dashing about before that sinks in.

She lets out a meek little howl.

"Melanie!" she hears Freddie call. It sounds so *loud*. She hopes no humans hear him and come looking, thinking maybe he's lost a dog in the forest or something. But this rational worry helps ground her, bring her back to herself.

It's not that Melanie is *gone* when the wolf takes over. She and all her rational thinking and brain power are still here. But the human elements of certain trains of thoughts and anxieties and assumptions just *do not matter* so much when she's a creature built for running and hunting and being among her people.

Melanie stops, closes her eyes, blocking out the intricacies of her wolf's vision. She takes a breath, focusing on breathing instead of all the smells that come with it, all the information that fires through her brain automatically. She feels her paws on the ground, the fur on her body, keeping her skin warm, the existence of her tail. She's a *wolf*.

It's weird, but...it's kind of okay, too.

The wolf part of her is pleased to be at the forefront of things. Excited. Melanie hadn't enjoyed being swept up in the excitement of a part of herself that she's avoided for so long. She hadn't enjoyed feeling, as she put it to Freddie, *savage*.

But she's here, and so is he, and he's already seen the worst part of any of it.

She takes off through the trees, not in a blind panic this time, but retracing her steps, following the scent of Freddie. It's almost as though the path through the woods is laid out in front of her in a way she can *see*, though vision isn't the sense that she's using. She can't make rational sense of it.

But, as she's learning, she doesn't *have* to. Sometimes things just *are*.

She finds Freddie quickly. He hasn't ventured far from the clearing, but it's obvious that he'd been considering whether he should go look for her, perhaps fearing she was in trouble somewhere. She whimpers as she approaches him. She wants to hug him, for her own comfort, and to reassure him, without language, to let him know she's okay. She can't, though. The best she can do is butt her head against him.

He's the one who can crouch down and take her in his arms.

"Oh, man, are you okay?" he asks. "I was worried about you, but I didn't know what to do."

She huffs, hoping it's a reassuring kind of sound, and sniffs at him. She can smell the anxiety in his sweat, feel his concern in the way he holds her. She rests her chin against his shoulder, pushing as close to him as she can when he's kneeling like this.

He stands up, and looks around. It's already darker outside, something Melanie knows must be impacting Freddie's ability to see around them much more than her own. "I shouldn't have left the clearing," Freddie admits. "I'm not sure the way back."

Melanie lets out a slight bark and begins to move back toward the clearing, which she knows by the scent of her clothes as well as what she thinks is kind of an innate sense of direction, an inborn sense of navigation in these woods that she feels so at home in, now that she's a wolf. In less than thirty seconds, they're back.

But Melanie doesn't know what to do now. It almost reminds her of the first and only time she smoked weed (the second night of the full moon, during their trip to the mountains two months ago), when she'd spend most of the experience wishing it was over and regretting her choice. It's the same feeling now. While so much of her is *relieved* to be in this form, to be this version of herself once again, part of her mind just wishes she could be a human so she could talk to Freddie, and so that he could drive her back to campus so she could go be in her dorm room and sleep in her bed like a normal person.

She's here until the dawn, however. There's no getting around that.

Freddie still watches her. "Don't you want to wander around for a while?"

Melanie wishes she could ask him, *Does that mean you're leaving?* Instead, she sits at his feet, looking up at him. Her tail wags, not something she controls, a reaction to his smile.

He pets her some more, chuckling. "Too bad there isn't more room for you to chase sticks," he laments, then adds, "Go on and explore for a bit. I'll be here."

It reassures her. There's a part of her that longs to roam, that wants to feel her legs move, feel her lungs take big breaths, wants to pant out any excess warmth in her body. She wants to *run*, she wants to explore the area, sniff around and find out who else has been here—other than Robbie, whose scent lingers in many patches of the woods.

So she does. She allows her instincts to take over for a time, she learns about this forest, about what lives here, the contours of the land, the waterways and vegetation and human-made trails that cut through. She begins to lose track of time as she explores, and when she

finally begins to consider her surroundings in a more *human* mindset, she snaps back immediately to wondering about Freddie.

When she gets back to the clearing, he's still there, sitting at the base of a tree, his coat wrapped around him. She hurries over to press close to him, to make sure he's warm enough.

He chuckles and scratches at the fur of her neck. "I'm fine," he tells her. "I'm just here to make sure you're fine."

Melanie curls up on the ground next to him, her head in his lap, and closes her eyes in bliss as he runs his hands through the thick fur of her neck, petting her until she begins to drift off.

She wakes up from the sound of something in the woods, ears perked, her head lifting. Her nose tells her it's just a possum. She shifts so that she can look at Freddie, who still leans against the tree.

He grins down at her. She whines questioningly at him. It has to be late by now. He probably has to leave soon. But he seems to understand her and shakes his head. "I'll be here all night. Just in case you need me."

She growls in response. He's being ridiculous. Humans don't belong in the woods, especially not overnight. But of course, humans as a species have survived so many different habitats. Of course he'll be fine here. And if there are any threats, Melanie will handle them.

She doubts Freddie really sleeps at all that night as he reclines against a tree, with Melanie half in his lap, but he doesn't complain, even when she can see him wincing and stretching out his shoulders all day the next day. What matters is he stays, and when the sun rises, and Melanie changes back, he's there to hold her, to tell her how wonderful his night with her was, how beautiful she was, and to drive her back to campus so she can get a few more hours of sleep in her very own bed.

But as she tucks herself in, she reflects that Freddie made a much better pillow.

## **March 2017**

It's hard to believe the school year is almost over. It's hard to believe *college* is almost over. It's felt like both the longest four years of Carly's life, but also the craziest. She's had some of the very best and very worst times of her life during college.

The best: getting back together with Sam, falling in love with Cat, reviving *iCarly*, supporting Spencer as he changed into a werewolf for the first time in a long time, Spencer moving to Los Angeles, building a network of wonderful and talented friends who can all be entrusted with the secret of lycanthropy, that trip to the mountains last winter when they all spent the full moon together.

The worst: Carly's severe and utter loneliness after she'd first moved, her depressing first apartment, her struggles to reconnect with Sam and her belief that she'd lose her again, the

way her budding relationship with Sam almost ruined her friendship with Cat, the struggles of sharing a too-small apartment with Sam and Cat, the heartache that came with being the one to hold the secret of both Spencer and Freddie's sexualities and their resulting self-loathing, school stress and the way it makes spending time with people she cares about so much more difficult, the realization that she may never have a close relationship with her father but that it doesn't mean she can't love him for who he is capable of being to her from afar.

But she also knows that when it comes down to it, these are just four years of a life, building toward her future, whatever that will be. For now, it seems that she and her partners are planning to stay in Los Angeles, as are most of her friends, for that matter. Most of them are seeking work in the entertainment industry, and this is the place to be for that kind of occupation. And it seems like, at least until they have decent-paying jobs squared away, it's going to make the most sense to just stay in the apartments they already have. Carly has no doubt that her dad will help her with the rent as long as it takes for her to really get on her feet after graduation; he'd done as much for Spencer for much longer. And Cat feels the same way.

Maybe it's because she doesn't otherwise have a close relationship with her father that she feels she can rely on him for money. Parental angst isn't something Sam can relate to in the same way; she's never known her father, and she only feels delight at the fact that her mother isn't in her life at all. But Carly has had many conversations with Cat over time about the struggle of absent parents, whose affection is primarily expressed through payments.

Cat's parents left Los Angeles when she was still in high school, to help her brother with a mental health crisis, leaving Cat adrift for a time when she couldn't stand to live with the aunt and uncle they'd appointed to be her temporary guardians. Though eventually Cat's Nona took her in, she'd almost as quickly moved away to Elderly Acres, leaving Cat and Sam as two teenage minors living alone in an apartment. That fact alone doesn't concern Carly all that much to consider; Spencer often felt barely older than she was, though he had always been legally an adult when he took care of her. Besides, it's clear that Sam and Cat had adapted to a domestic life together, had figured out how to cohabitate before they'd even become romantically involved.

The real struggle for Cat, the one Carly can relate to, is how her parents seem to assume that Nona is handling all of Cat's emotional needs and they only need to cover her financial ones. It reminds Carly of her dad, reliably paying Spencer's bills every month, and only occasionally reaching out to actually talk to his kids, sometimes through odd methods, like performatively texting on *iCarly*. There's only so much that she can really blame on her dad's work. Likewise, there's only so much that Cat can excuse with her parents being occupied with her brother's care. It feels like they've simply been set aside, Cat for her brother, Carly for her dad's work. Carly understands better now why Spencer had sometimes seemed to revert to a little boy around their father. It's probably the last time he'd felt truly cared for by him.

Carly doesn't talk about their father with Spencer much. It's too painful a topic for both of them. Instead, she commiserates with Cat, and they find comfort in each other, in the family



they've built with Sam. But Carly had assumed that the status quo with their father was the same for her as it was for Spencer.

Until Spencer calls her toward the end of March.

"Carly!" He sounds agitated from the moment she answers. "I've got terrible news!"

"Oh, no," Carly murmurs. She braces herself. "Terrible news" from Spencer could be anything from something bad happened to their dad or that he started an accidental fire to a sculpture he's been working on fell apart or he's managed to start a feud with a child who lives in his building. "What's going on?"

"It's Socko," he starts. Carly has just the briefest moment to worry that Spencer's best friend is in the hospital before Spencer laments, "He doesn't want to stay in California! He says it's too sunny."

"Wait, let me get this straight," Carly says slowly. "Socko moved to *Los Angeles*...and his complaint isn't the cost of living or the shallow people or the crowded freeways, but *the weather*!?" she asks incredulously.

"Yeah, I guess he's an overcast kind of guy," Spencer replies.

"What is he, a vampire?" Carly asks sarcastically.

Spencer laughs, harder than Carly thinks the comment deserves. "Don't be ridiculous," he says.

Carly lets that sink in, but Spencer doesn't see the irony of the situation, so she moves on. "Does that mean you're going back to Seattle?" she asks.

"I don't *want* to!" Spencer insists. "I really love it here! I've been selling more sculptures than I did up there. And I like living close to you."

"I do, too," Carly agrees. "So then, what's the problem? You can just stay here."

"But without Socko, I can't afford the rent here! And I don't know that I could afford a one-bedroom by myself, especially not with paying for my storage unit, too."

"Do you really need the storage unit? Wouldn't you have more room if you weren't living with Socko?" She doesn't know what's in his storage unit, but she's always assumed it contains art supplies that don't fit in the bedroom that serves as Spencer's art studio (the main reason Spencer can't rent just a studio, because he wouldn't have room for all his giant sculptures).

"I can't!" Spencer insists. "The storage unit is important!"

"Can't you ask Dad for help?" Carly wonders.

Spencer sighs. "I could, but...every time I do, he goes on about how I should be past this by now. And I know he's right." He's quiet for the briefest moment, then adds. "It makes me feel

like a failure.”

“You’re not a failure,” Carly tells him immediately.

“Aren’t I, though?” Spencer wonders. “Maybe if I was meant to be an artist, I should have found my niche by now.”

“It’s okay to do what you love, even if it doesn’t make you much money,” Carly tries.

“Not in this world,” Spencer replies sadly.

Carly knows he’s right. She just also doesn’t want to think about it being true, because then it might mean that all the effort and money she’s poured into school might not actually get her anywhere. “What are you going to do?” she finally asks him.

“I don’t know.” He huffs out a frustrated breath. “I guess I still have some time to figure it out. Our lease is up in May and that’s when Socko’s planning to leave. So at least next month he’ll be around to help with the rent. After that? I’m not sure. Maybe I’ll have to get a *real* job.”

The thought of Spencer standing behind a register wearing one of those silly paper hats like the people at Inside Out Burger makes Carly sad. Though, she’s also heard that Inside Out Burger pays pretty good money. Maybe it wouldn’t be so bad. “Well, maybe you and I can live together while we figure out our next moves,” Carly suggests. She wouldn’t *mind* living with her brother again, but it’s not exactly the plan. The plan is for her, Sam, and Cat to figure out how *they* might live together. And somehow, she doesn’t see Sam, Cat, and Spencer living together harmoniously. Their domestic styles are too different. Spencer living with her couldn’t be a long-term solution, but maybe it could be short-term.

“Maybe so,” Spencer replies uncertainly. He sighs heavily. “I just don’t know, Carly. Why can’t we all just live in the mountains forever?”

Carly smiles. “I loved it up there, too.”

“Maybe I can just camp at Shadow Creek Park for the rest of my life,” Spencer suggests.

“You won’t have to do that,” she assures him.

“Okay, well, thanks, kiddo,” Spencer tells her. “I’ll let you get back to your studying or whatever. But I feel better just knowing that we’ll figure something out.”

“We will. Don’t worry,” Carly assures him.

But she’s troubled when she hangs up. Spencer had always taken care of her when she was growing up, and did a great job of it. Maybe it’s time for her to return the favor. But *how*?

Carly doesn’t even know what her life is going to be like after graduation, but now she knows she has something else to worry about on top of everything else.

**April 2017**

“Well, Mr. Oliver, I’d say your career right now is looking very healthy. Very healthy, indeed,” his agent, Peggy, states in her typical professional, no-nonsense fashion.

He’s been having a very good meeting with his agent and his manager. At this point, he’s just filmed his last episode for *Kitchen Monsters*, including an epic and tragic death scene, and they’re checking in about what’s next for him. They’ve been discussing the challenging supporting role in an independent movie (about a pastor having a crisis of faith helping a divorced woman come to terms with her sexuality; Beck plays the woman’s son) that he’s set to shoot over the summer, the pilot for a teen dramedy that was picked up that will start shooting in the fall with Beck in a starring role (as an average high schooler with a secret double life as a psychic vigilante). They’ve debated whether Beck needs a publicist, and he’s decided to follow his manager’s advice, and reconsider the question if the indie flick goes to festivals.

His agent is happy. He’d hired Peggy early on in his career, and had liked that she is the type to just get down to business and find practical solutions, because Beck, as an artist, doesn’t always know where to start with things. She’s respected in the industry and had been instrumental in Beck landing his role on *Kitchen Monsters*. And, frankly, the work she’s been able to secure for him has been a dream so far.

His manager, Darnell, though, Beck can tell he has something else on his mind. He’s an older man, and Beck would be lying if he didn’t admit he’d initially been drawn to him because he found him attractive. He’s often a foil to Peggy’s intense practicality—laid-back, dreamy. But he has great insight, and, as a gay man himself, knows how to handle Beck’s sexuality to ensure he’s able to continue to get a wide range of roles.

“Peggy’s right, you’re in a good position right now,” Darnell says. “If the movie goes to festivals and if the show gets another season, you could be set for the next couple of years at least. If nothing else, you have your foot in the door to some other great opportunities. But I do have one thing I think you should consider.” He fixes Beck with a playfully stern look. “Don’t you think it’s time to live somewhere that...*reflects* your success?”

Beck blinks. “But my trailer reflects *me*.”

“Well, certainly, and you’ve done a remarkable job so far of using your *unorthodox* living situation to give yourself a down-to-earth, free-wheeling image,” Darnell concedes. “But the more successful you get, the more likely you are to be criticized for, I don’t know, fetishizing poverty?” He looks to Peggy, as if to solicit her opinion.

She nods gravely. “I could see that happening,” she admits. “Eccentricities have a way of shifting from cute quirks to catalysts for resenting someone’s success.”

“Besides, you’re a grown man with his own career,” Darnell adds. “Isn’t it time to move out of your parents’ basement, or, I’m sorry, driveway?” He smirks to take the sting out of his jab.

Beck *would* feel jabbed by it, if it hadn't already been considering this very issue. His parents, bless them, would probably let him live in their driveway in perpetuity if he really wanted to, but it isn't exactly Beck's dream for the paparazzi to photograph him wrapped in a towel as he walks from the pool house where he takes his showers back to his trailer, his wet hair unstyled and limp. Actually, he's surprised this hasn't happened yet. He's been shot dragging the recycling bin to the curb after a party, so it's not like they don't know where he lives.

That's probably a sign that it's time to move, actually.

"It doesn't have to be *fancy*," Peggy supplies. "But it should at *least* be a step up from where you are. Which I suppose anywhere with running water would suffice," she adds dryly.

"You could put a tiny house in the right neighborhood and you'd probably be praised for a 'surprisingly modest' choice," Darnell encourages.

"I don't want a tiny house," Beck replies. In fact, the more he thinks about it, and considers the trip to the mountains with his friends over the winter, the more he thinks he wants the *opposite* of a tiny house. "Okay. I think I know what I want," he tells them. "It would be unorthodox, but it has character."

Beck can see the surprise on the faces of his agent and manager as he lays out what he's looking for in a piece of property to buy, but he's made up his mind.

Darnell glances at Peggy, but then nods slowly. "I'll call up some of my connections in real estate and see what I can find for you," he tells Beck. He grins slightly. "You're full of surprises, young man. It'll take you far."

"That's the goal," Beck grins back.

# Success

**May 2017**

Graduation. Jade can't even believe it. Four years of hard work—though, for her, most of the hard work was in figuring out how to work with idiots—and thousands of dollars later, Jade has achieved a piece of paper that says *You could probably make a film if you wanted to!*

It's more than that, she knows it is. It's about the connections she actually made, such as Chandra and a handful of others in terms of students she'd connected with, and professors she'd impressed who have industry connections. It's about the practical skills she'd developed, some of which she'd already felt pretty accomplished in, but had learned there was more room to improve. But a lot of it is just about the clout of being about to say she attended this well-respected film school so that someday, someone might take her seriously as an artist and help fund one of her movies.

Jade has long been confident in her art, but she knows how to play the game better now.

She actually walks for graduation in the way overpriced robe made of material that doesn't breathe and the ridiculous hat, something that feels corny and silly, but damn it, she's earned the chance to have her name announced in front of all her peers with her high GPA being highlighted. Her mother sobs when she sees her after the ceremony, which Jade rolls her eyes at, but at least Tori is there to be a sane perso—nope, Tori's tearing up, too. Probably leftover stress from finals week.

Her father doesn't show up. But she didn't invite him.

And then, they have barely enough time to go across town for Tori's commencement (and Carly, Cat, and Andre's), where Jade gets to sit in the audience this time. She's sitting with Sam, Spencer, Trina, Tori's parents, Andre's parents, Andre's grandma, Cat's Nona...it's a bit of an odd crowd, but at least Sam keeps things interesting while they listen to an excruciating list of names while sitting in the hot sun, waiting for the individual moments they get to cheer loudly for the people they care about. Making fun of people is a time-honored pastime, and one she and Sam both excel at.

And afterwards, it's like they finally get a chance to rest for the first time in a long time. They'd missed the full moon; it fell in the middle of Finals Week. But honestly, even if they'd had the time, Jade doesn't think they would've had the energy for a trip to Shadow Creek Park. Even with three nights of wolfsbane keeping Tori going while she studied for her tests, she's still not amped up like she usually is around the full moon. That night, all she really does is curl up with Jade and sleep.

The next night is when they party.

Robbie, Freddie, and Melanie have come down from Stanford, having graduated themselves the day before as well; Beck had gone to watch Robbie graduate, wearing sunglasses and a hat to stay a bit incognito (and Jade knows that means Beck is serious, because normally he'd

never put *anything* over his beautiful hair). For now, Freddie and Melanie are staying in the spare room in Spencer's apartment since apparently his friend Socko went back to Seattle. Jade wonders how long that will last, whether Freddie and Melanie's careers are going to take them somewhere other than LA. Unlike the rest of them, they don't seem to be planning to work in the entertainment industry.

It's funny to Jade that Beck still lives in the same old trailer where they used to make out and watch movies when they were in high school. She wonders what it says about him that he hasn't yet moved out.

The graduation party is in full swing, complete with people outside tossing a graduation cap around like a frisbee. Beck has a full catering spread in the pool house, with a giant cake and a champagne fountain. It's so incongruous with his little trailer that Jade wants to laugh. It's really just the core group of them that are attending, the ones who have been partying at Beck's for years. Well, plus Trina, who comes along with Andre, and Melanie, who attends with Freddie. But a few of the people who came to the mountains with them aren't here. It feels more intimate, but also, it feels weirdly at times like Jade turns to look for someone to realize they're not here.

Eventually, conversations switch from the celebratory sentiments and the conversations about how surreal it feels to be finished with textbooks and tests to what happens next. Most of them, at least those of them that are staying in Los Angeles, feel like they have at least some connections and networking they can use as a place to start, though Jade, at least, knows she'll be making films no matter what. It's just the quality of them that will differ, depending on if she has funding and therefore the ability to pay talent or if she has to do it all herself with her friends like she always has while working some day job to pay for it. She hopes it won't come to that, but she's always the pragmatist of the group, imagining the worst case scenario while all around her, her friends talk about the people they know, the references they can put on applications that they feel will really make them stand out, the auditions they'd like to attend. Beck offers to do what he can to offer his friends a leg up in the business, which makes Jade roll her eyes even more. But it's nice of him to offer, she supposes.

But apparently, his influence isn't the only thing he has to offer.

"I wanted to run something by you guys," Beck states.

Carly laughs. "He gives us food, he gives us drinks, and now comes the conditions."

"No, it's nothing like that," Beck assures her. He looks around the room; Jade can see him assuring he has everyone's attention, can see the way he stands up a little straighter. Ever the performer. "So, I'm thinking of moving out of my parents' driveway."

"Can't *imagine* why you'd ever do *that*," Jade drawls sarcastically.

Beck glares playfully, but otherwise ignores her. "What if I told you guys," he begins theatrically, "That I found a place I'm interested in, that's secluded in the woods and has *plenty* of space?"

Cat drops the piece of pita bread and hummus she's holding; Sam immediately dives to catch it, brushing dirt off of it. "Shut up!" Cat shouts. "Did you buy the cabin?!"

Beck grins. "No. I found something even better." He glances around the room, ensuring everyone is still listening to him. Jade has to literally bite her tongue to keep from telling him to stop building suspense. "I haven't bought it yet," he amends, "But I found an old summer camp that's for sale, and it's *amazing*."

Tori gazes over at Jade meaningfully. "This could solve our Shadow Creek Park problem." She turns back to Beck and adds quickly, "If you wouldn't mind us visiting, of course."

"Not at all," Beck replies. "But to be honest..." He pauses. Probably still being dramatic, Jade thinks, but then he looks over at Carly. "I mean this as an *offer*, not as anything conditional."

Carly glances at her partners, then regards him quizzically. "We're listening."

"I was actually thinking we could maybe...go in for the property as a group," Beck admits. "Listen, I've saved enough living frugally these past few years that I'm comfortable with the down payment, and I'm pretty sure I could handle the costs for a little while, but I would need some help after a certain point. But since you've all graduated and are looking for work now..." he trails off meaningfully.

"Like, you'd want us to pay you to visit?" Sam asks skeptically.

"No, no," Beck waves his hands. "No, I'm explaining this all wrong. Guys. It's a *summer camp*. One that used to be for adults, like, maybe a rehab camp? Meaning there are multiple buildings on the premises that have electricity, water, full bathrooms, kitchenettes. There's a main building with an industrial kitchen. There's a gym, there's a pool, there's a theater. It'd be like owning an apartment complex, but, you know, with neighbors you actually *like*." He grins. "I'm asking if you all want to move in together, at this camp, where we wouldn't have to share a *house*. Just a *camp*."

"So, wait, let me get this straight," Jade narrows her eyes at him. "Are you pitching that we all make a *commune*?"

"A *werewolf* commune," Robbie says in wonder.

They all look at each other. It sounds *amazing*. It sounds *perfect*. It sounds like everything great about the cabin in the mountains but without having to hear each other fucking through the walls, with the space to not have to have someone in her business at all times. There has to be a catch. "How far away is it?" Jade asks.

"It's in the mountains, but not as far up as where we went camping," Beck explains. "So, yeah, it would be a commute to the city. But let's face it. No matter where you are in the city, it's a commute to get *anywhere*."

He makes a fair point. Jade looks at Tori. Tori's face is bright, hopeful. Eager. Jade can tell she's already won over.

Tori turns to Beck. “We’re in,” she tells him excitedly.

“Just one problem,” Jade drawls. “We don’t have jobs yet.”

“Most of us don’t,” Carly adds. “When would you need us to be able to contribute?”

Beck frowns. “I mean...I’m not sure I’d be approved for the mortgage loan if I tried to do it myself. So I’d probably need a few people to sign with me.”

“Maybe we just have to wait until more of us get jobs,” Carly says reluctantly.

“Freddie and I were looking at possibilities in this area for our fields,” Melanie says happily. “Because we were thinking of staying here. And there are *lots* of listings. Maybe we could get something quickly!” Out of the corner of her eye, Jade can see Sam roll her eyes theatrically, probably at the notion of Freddie and Melanie staying here, but everyone else seems pleased.

“Maybe,” Beck says uncertainly. “But my manager says he doesn’t think this place will be on the market for long.”

“I might be able to help,” Trina suggests. She’s been so quiet—which is shocking on its own—that Jade had almost forgotten she was here.

“Trina, you *barely* make anything,” Tori reminds her.

“I’m not *talking* about me!” Trina shoots back. She returns her attention to Beck. “How much room is there? You know, for people to live?”

“Lots,” is all Beck says.

“Because Sinjin got a job offer straightaway after graduation last week. He started this week. And I know with his new salary he was thinking of moving, anyway.” She gives Jade a sour look before she says, “Maybe if you invited him, he could offer some financial help.”

“Of course,” Beck says easily. “He and Burf would be welcome.” At this point, Jade isn’t even going to argue the point. She’d actually gotten used to the two weirdos during the trip to the cabin in December. But she’s not about to let them know that. She prefers when they’re afraid of her.

“There’s Goomer, too,” Cat suggests. “He makes money. Maybe he’d like to move.”

“To a place with its own gym? Seems likely to me,” Carly replies.

“I could help with money,” Sam says quietly.

Jade looks at her in surprise. She’s not the only one. “Wait, how?” Cat asks.

Sam looks uncomfortable. “Ahh, look. Working with Dice...we do pretty well. And he’s a minor, so he can’t legally have his own LLC. It used to be in his mom’s name, but it’s been transferred to me. So...technically...I own Dice’s company.”



“Since *when*?” Carly asks.

“Since a while,” Sam answers. “These past couple years, I’ve just been really trying to make enough money to feel like, you know. Like maybe I contribute. Like maybe someday we could move in together if I made enough.”

“Sam!” Cat hollers, throwing herself at Sam in a big hug.

“Look, I’m not rich,” Sam tells Beck. “But I have a company in my name that makes actual profits. I think I could probably be a good help in getting a loan.”

Freddie looks over at Beck curiously. “Do you think with those three people, you might have enough?” he asks.

Beck nods faintly. “Yeah, I’m...I’m pretty sure.”

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By Monday evening, they’re touring the old campground. To Tori, it feels almost like a dream, to have this opportunity for all of them, some kind of *real* possibility to be able to experience something like the trip to Wrightwood last winter *regularly*. That stands out as a peak experience for her, and she knows she’s not the only one.

Everyone who came to the mountains is there, even Dice, though he’s not old enough to purchase property or even to live at the camp until he finishes high school. But he’s there as Goomer’s manager, so if Goomer chooses to invest in the property, Dice can try to ensure it’s in his best interest. Sinjin and Burf are there, because Sinjin’s income could be a great asset, and so is Spencer, though Carly admits he doesn’t have a whole lot of income to speak of. Tori kind of figures that’s *why* Spencer is there; since his friend left to return to Seattle, she’s heard Carly mention a few times that she’s not sure how Spencer is going to be able to afford to stay in Los Angeles.

It seems that being able to afford to stay is something they’re all going to go in on together.

The camp is *big*. That much makes sense. It boasts a three-hundred person capacity, though that’s just literally the space required to put people in rows of bunk beds and put a roof over them. Still, it means there’s a lot of space to work with, a lot of different buildings.

Initially, the tour is just of the facility itself, as if the plan is to keep the camp operation as an actual camp. But the realtor pretty quickly catches on to the group’s intentions when they start talking about how to divide up who will live where, who can work where, what modifications and improvements they’d have to make to create more habitable dwellings?

Despite the rustic appearances, Tori thinks they’re probably better than any first apartment she might find in the city. They’re insulated, with heat and air conditioning. The bathrooms are modern. The biggest drawbacks are that the cabins are basically big, adjoining rooms, and the kitchenettes are quite small.

Most of the cabins are situated in rows along a walkway, with enough distance between them to offer some privacy and room for building additions, as needed. Sam, Cat and Carly claim a cabin that's double-sized, which makes sense, since there are more of them. Jade seems keen to take the cabin next to theirs, which works for Tori. It's about the size of an average Los Angeles two-bedroom apartment, if not laid out like one. They'll have to get creative with the space. Maybe dressing screens, or bookshelves, helping to partition off certain sections.

Andre seems interested in taking the cabin next to Tori, but Trina's not having it (and, frankly, as much as Tori loves Andre, she'd rather not live right next door to her sister. Sharing a bathroom throughout their childhood was enough). "Isn't there something *nicer* than a cabin?" Trina asks.

"I'm sure there is," Andre says gamely. Trina does not look so sure. She looks as if she's second-guessing all of this.

Beck states he's probably just going to park his trailer near one of the smaller cabins, the ones intended for only one or two campers that aren't practical for someone to live in full time. But they'd essentially serve the purpose of the pool house at Beck's parents' house, as a source of running water, and a walk-in closet space. Robbie claims an adjacent cabin, explaining, "I won't be with Beck *all* the time, and I could use a private space of my own!" From the way he looks significantly at Freddie as he explains this, Tori realizes...whatever is going on with Robbie and Beck's open relationship is likely *still* on.

Which, good for them. She doesn't think she's ever seen Robbie happier or more confident.

Freddie seems worried about the cabins' abilities to handle power, since he works with computers. The realtor assures them that there's plenty of office space at the camp that would be suitable for such hardware. Freddie exchanges a skeptical glance with Sinjin. It's clear that neither of them are convinced.

But as the tour takes them to the community building, they stop at what the realtor describes as an administrative building. Though as rustic as any cabin on the outside, the inside turns out to reveal a surprisingly modern office space.

"Now, this I can work with," Freddie says appreciatively.

"Me, too," Sinjin replies eagerly.

"So, cool, this is like...a coworking space," Burf suggests.

"For any of us who thrive in a shared workspace," Freddie nods.

"What if we...don't?" Melanie says warily.

That's when the realtor reveals the rooms within the community building.

There are only a few of them, and they're basically hotel suites, just a bedroom, bathroom, sitting area, and kitchenette, certainly with less space than the cabins. But apparently, this is Trina's speed.

“Now, this is more like it,” she says, looking around, pleased. “I can’t live inside a *log cabin*.”

“They’re not made of logs at all,” Tori can’t help but point out.

“Whatever, I’m not a nature person,” Trina says dismissively. “But if I can be up here and have my day and later on for dinner all I have to do is go downstairs to our giant industrial kitchen without having to step outside? Sign me up.”

She makes a fair point. Tori glances at Jade, worried they’re making the wrong choice by picking a cabin, where they’ll have to go outside to have a real meal; the kitchenette capabilities of the cabins are the same as the rooms, basically refrigerators and microwaves and other small appliances. No stoves or ovens. And Tori knows how Jade feels about the outdoors.

But Jade seems unfazed. “I’d rather live in my own cabin than in a *hotel room*.”

“Shows what you know,” is apparently the best Trina can come up with.

She and Andre take two adjacent rooms that have a communicating door between them. Sinjin and Burf take another two. And Melanie takes a third.

Freddie frowns. “I thought—” he glances at the others around them, seeming to wish they had privacy to discuss this. “I thought we might live in a cabin together.”

Melanie nods and takes his hand. “All my life, I’ve never had my own space,” she tells him in a low voice that Tori nonetheless can hear perfectly. “Sam and I shared everything growing up, then all through boarding school, and college, I’ve had roommates. I need to know what it’s like to be *by myself*.” She smiles at him. “But you’ll see me. You’ll see me *a lot*,” she assures him.

With his workspace secure, and his girlfriend living in the community building, Freddie then claims the cabin next to Robbie’s.

Spencer seems willing to take any cabin, though Carly suggests, “Maybe you shouldn’t live *right* next to us, in case you start a fire.”

“Then wouldn’t you want him to live near other people to help him put it out?” Beck asks warily.

But then, the realtor shows them a building that used to be the art hut.

“Oh, *wow!*” Spencer enthuses. The walls are covered in murals, there are counters wrapping all around the space, multiple prep sinks, built-in cabinets under the countertops with plenty of storage space. “This place is *perfect!*” he crows, throwing his hands in the air. “Can I live here?” he asks.

He seems to be asking permission from Beck, who blinks and grins disarmingly. “I mean, sure. Whatever you want.”

“Yes!” Spencer shouts. “I’ll just shove my bed in the corner over there and just do *art* in here! It’s what it’s *made* for!”

When Carly notices a spigot for a hose outside, she seems satisfied.

Goomer has been patiently touring the facility, nodding along as the realtor shows them things, but at a certain point, he runs out of patience. “Where’s the gym?” he finally blurts out.

The gym is a bit further out from the cabins, but still within easy walking distance from the community building. And Goomer’s reaction to the inside is basically a mirror image of Spencer’s reaction to the art hut.

“Woaaaaow,” he drawls out slowly, looking around at rows of weights and machines. “These are *ours*?” he asks, astonished.

The realtor nods, “The seller is willing to just incorporate the machines into the price rather than trying to sell them to someone else and have to arrange transportation.”

Goomer grins, “This is *much* better than my other gym!”

“It actually is,” Dice says, awed.

“There’s a locker room!” Goomer shouts as he heads toward the back of the space. “I *love* locker rooms!”

Dice grins. “I think he’d be perfectly happy living in the locker room.”

Other spaces get claimed as they move along; Cat wants a yurt to make costumes in, Andre decides he wants to turn the camp’s tiny chapel into a home music studio because of its acoustics, the amphitheater and indoor theater are spaces people agree to share for various purposes, from Robbie’s comedy, to Trina’s stage directing, to Tori and Beck’s audition self-tapes, to Jade turning a space into a literal soundstage to make films. Tori loves that not only does this old camp provide a form of communal housing, it can also be a communal space for creativity.

Even Dice claims a cabin, though he admits he has to wait until he’s finished with high school before he can move in. “Just one more year!” he enthuses. “Ohh, I can’t *wait*!”

“But you’ll be here all the time, won’t you?” Goomer frowns. “Because I’m here.”

“Of course, buddy,” Dice pats him on the shoulder. “Especially when I get my driver’s license this month!”

“So,” the realtor finally says, “It sounds like you’re interested, yes?”

“Definitely,” Beck agrees.

While Tori is incredibly excited about the possibility that this camp might be theirs, she’s also a little worried. They’ll have to start getting jobs before they can really modify their cabins,

to try to turn them into self-contained homes. And there's the fact that...she and Jade have never lived together before.

On the way home, she expresses some of her worry to Jade. "It seems really awesome, but I was a little surprised that you seem okay with living in a camp cabin."

Jade grunts in acknowledgment. "I like the idea of having my own space," is her simple reply. A moment later, she adds, "Don't get me wrong, I like the whole *idea* of this. Beck pitching it like living in an apartment complex where you actually *like* your neighbors appeals to me. But I'd rather not share any *walls* with them. That was the problem with the trip to the mountains for me. Everyone felt too close. I need space to think, I need space to work, I need space to decompress, I need time away from everybody."

"Except me," Tori suggests, a bit doubtfully.

But Jade offers her a smile. "Except you," she confirms.

"But that's—we've never lived together," Tori replies.

"Yeah, I'm aware of that," Jade says dryly.

"That's just it, though, we're jumping into living together and it's...*not* even really a real apartment. It's two big rooms, not even a real kitchen—and if you need time to yourself, how can you have that when there are only two rooms and there's not even a real *door* between them?"

But Jade simply smiles. "Tori. We're going to live at a whole *camp*. If I need to get away from you, there are like ten other cabins I could go into, there's that home theater room in the community building where I could go put on a movie and put out a do not disturb sign. Honestly, I might claim another cabin just to have as a place for just *me* to go be weird by myself. But you know what?"

"What?"

"I'm not worried about wanting to be away from you all that much."

Tori smiles. She can't help it. But still... "But remember when Sam, Cat and Carly lived together? And it just created friction?"

"The only friction I want with you is when you're on top—"

"I'm being serious."

Jade is quiet, perhaps considering Tori's point. Finally, she says, "I don't think there's much about you that's going to surprise me."

"Huh?" Tori asks.

"I just mean...we've spent as much time with each other as we possibly can. We've eaten together, slept together, sat and done homework together, made films together. I've directed

you. And sure. All of that isn't *exactly* the same as living together. But I *know* you. I know that you slurp your soup and that it's *disgusting*, I know that you kick in the night and that you turn into a radiator under the blankets even when you *don't* have a full coat of fur, I know that you hum to yourself when you work on things, which is *annoying*, that you tap your pencil when you're thinking, which is *also* annoying, but, I also know that you also put one hundred and ten percent of yourself into everything that you do." Tori smiles, and then Jade adds. "Which is *also* annoying."

"Right," Tori mutters, nodding to herself. "I really see why you want to live with me."

"You idiot," Jade replies. "I already know every reason why you drive me crazy and you know what? Yeah. I still want to be with you all the time."

Tori turns to look at her. "Yeah?"

"Well, except when I need to be by myself. But otherwise? I want to come home to you. Or... for you to come home to me. However it works. I want *you*." She shrugs, eyes still on the road. "So yeah. Maybe you'll find new ways to annoy me once we're living together, but I'll make sure I have ways of regulating my emotions. I can't wait to live with you."

"Well, that's all well and good," Tori starts, "But what if *you* start annoying the hell out of *me*?"

"Impossible," Jade refutes flatly. "I have zero annoying habits."

"You pick your cuticles, trim the ends of your hair with—"

"Not annoying," Jade insists.

Tori laughs softly. "You're right. It's not annoying to me."

Tori doesn't have to be part of all the details of making the offer and securing the mortgage and signing all the paperwork that legally binds four people into a property contract, and she's glad for that. But she does hear about the aftermath, when the offer is quickly accepted, and, somehow, the camp is theirs.

And she can't wait to finally move in with Jade.

## **June 2017**

Dice has never been a typical high schooler. He's never been a typical *kid*, just in general. And it's not even because he's a werewolf. It's more because he just has never had time for frivolous pursuits. There's a whole world out there waiting for Dice to make his mark on it.

Once he finishes high school.

Truly, *being* in high school is sometimes the most frustrating thing for him. At the beginning of June, there are only a couple weeks left of his junior year. He's not worried about his

grades, particularly. He just can't wait for it to be *over*, already.

Not just so he can devote more time to his business ventures. But so he can go up to the newly-purchased camp that, in a year's time, he'll be making his full-time home.

A year or two ago, Dice probably would have scoffed at the idea of communal living, because as far as he's concerned, cooperation isn't exactly the way humans operate most of the time. But he hadn't considered the economic benefits, the way sharing and pooling resources can actually make the cost of living *cheaper* in the long run.

Dice is willing to take a chance on *any* good deal.

Admittedly, he had been a little nervous, when Sam came to him asking to use the assets *he* had built, from *his* LLC (in all ways but, you know, *legally*, because of arbitrary age restrictions imposed on him by a tyrannical government) to invest in the property. But, real estate is always a solid investment, and once he realized *who* it was actually for...he'd been intrigued.

Being a werewolf has largely been an inconvenience in Dice's life. In the same way that he rarely finds common ground with kids his age because he doesn't spend his valuable time on mindless hobbies, he has never felt like he had much time for lycanthropy, either. It didn't help that all it really signified to his mother was that he was "an adult" now, which didn't actually change much, as Dice had felt that way for a long time. It just meant he had to start paying rent.

Really, as far as Dice was concerned for most of his life, being a werewolf is a means to an end. The only time his mother or his Aunt Fergene changed was if his horrible accident-prone aunt needed to heal up from an injury. They'd never taken Dice somewhere out in nature to run around. Not that he really *wanted* to do anything like that.

Not until he found out his *friends* are werewolves, too.

In yet another distinction from his peers, Dice's friends have always been older than he is. It really had started with Cat, who seemed much *younger* than her age in some ways, except for the fact that she did a lot to manage her household with her grandmother (when he first met her) and later, with Sam. Mostly, Dice respected that she didn't *treat* him like a kid.

Sam had been similar, seeming to recognize something in Dice's self-sufficiency that she could identify with, though, maybe for that reason, she tends to be a bit harder on him.

But really, it's Goomer whose friendship has surprised him the most. Goomer had been an investment, someone Dice had been interested in for his traits; his speed, his strength, and, later, his lycanthropy as another means to an end, a way to build aggression and energy to unleash in a fight. It's not cheating if it's a *natural ability* your fighter possesses, any more than Michael Phelps's unnaturally long arms make him cheat at swimming.

But Goomer's genuine kindness had won him over. Despite gaps in their age, intellect level, outlooks on life, Goomer had become his best friend simply by caring about him. Dice had never quite experienced anything like it.

Until he'd been taken in by the werewolves.

Sure, Sam and Cat had been his friends for a while by that point. He'd even begun to develop a rapport with Carly after years of knowing her. But his friends had taken him to Shadow Creek Park to run around, and it had changed everything.

At first he went just for Goomer, to make sure his friend had a chance to release some stress. There are limits to how much wolfish energy can be contained before it has an adverse effect, as Dice knows, on the evenings he's popped wolfsbane for the third night in a row and can barely focus on what he's trying to accomplish. But it turned out...doing something frivolous and *silly* had been...*fun*.

And then he'd gone to the mountains of Wrightwood with his older friends, the token kid, who, despite the fact that they'd kept substances out of his hands, they otherwise hadn't *treated* like a child. Every time he spends time with these people, he learns something new. A new perspective on love, on money, on friendship, on community.

On *family*.

Family, for Dice, feels like obligation. His mother had been obligated to care for him until she deemed him worthy of caring for himself. His father had been obligated to contribute to his care, if only monetarily, since Dice has no relationship with the man. He and his mother are obligated to care for his Aunt Fergene and her many injuries.

And maybe, for that reason, he prefers friends. He prefers the bonds he has with people like Goomer, who offers kindness with no expectation of reciprocity (that fool...), with Sam and Cat, who take him under their wing and offer him a place among a community of people who want him to grow up with support and care. Dice had never felt like a kid, but in giving him the opportunity to play, maybe they've allowed him to be one, in a way he *chooses*, a frivolous pursuit that he embarks on *willingly*.

One more year of high school. One more year until he can live full-time among people who have changed his views that the world is totally cut-throat and competitive.

It's not *all* the world. But it's certainly Dice.

And with a supportive community, he will be even better suited to outperform all his competitors.

He knows enough to know the most successful people *never* do it alone.

-

The "werewolf commune," as they've all half-jokingly taken to call the old summer camp, was officially theirs within a week of Beck pitching the idea. There were a couple of weeks in which the location was in flux, with the previous owners removing the last of their property from the camp, and toward the end of May, they all began to move in. Now, in early June, Spencer's apartment is empty and he's turned in his keys, and his living space in the art hut is beginning to come together.



It *feels* like living in an art studio, but Spencer doesn't mind. He feels more creative when he's constantly surrounded by evidence of art, everything from the murals to his own supplies to the paint stains on the floors and the lingering scents of wet modeling clay and turpentine. It's as though the artistic sensibilities of the thousands of people who passed through this building have infused it with creative energy, making Spencer feel regularly inspired. He can't wait to get everything settled so he can start *making art*.

It's not a perfect living space. It's a little bit secluded from the other cabins, but for now, Spencer doesn't mind that. It helps him stay focused, and he knows people are just a quick rollerblade ride away. He doesn't have much of a kitchen to speak of, though they're all just working with kitchenettes in their living space just now, so that's not unique; they've all been meeting for meals in the community building so far anyway. Besides, Carly claims she feels better with him living in a building without an oven or stove, to keep the fire risk lower. Not that any of the other cabins are equipped with those things, either, but he understands why she targets him specifically. He and fire have a *complicated* relationship.

A real drawback, though, is that unlike the other cabins or even Goomer's locker room, the art hut doesn't have a full bathroom. He has claimed one of the other tiny cabins to use as a place to shower and get dressed, much like Beck, and besides, he knows they have goals to make each person's living space better. Some of the early goals in cabins are the hang doors where before there were maybe just curtains between rooms. Eventually, another goal is to build additions onto camp structures that require more space, including to give each building that doesn't have one a full kitchen. Spencer getting a full bathroom would probably be a later goal like this, when everyone living at the camp starts making their own money and can invest in improvements rather than just keep up with payments and buy food.

Even with the imperfect art hut as his home, he's really, really happy to move here.

When Socko had left Los Angeles, Spencer hadn't known what he was going to do. He hadn't wanted Carly to worry too much about him, especially with finishing up school, but he was honestly struggling to figure out how he was going to afford to keep living there. Socko had taken pity on him and paid the May rent before he left, because he's a good friend. But all that had really offered Spencer was more breathing room.

Sure, he's selling more sculptures here than in Seattle. But that doesn't mean much when it still isn't enough to cover his rent and monthly bills and food and gas and anything else he needs to live on. Their dad had cut him off. That isn't something he wants Carly to know. The last thing he wants to do is ruin her image of their father as a really good man. And, well, Spencer thinks he's a good man, too. He can't really blame him for deciding to make Spencer stand on his own two feet, really for the first time in his life. What Spencer *doesn't* like is that he did it without even a conversation, without ever taking one of Spencer's calls.

That's the part he thinks would hurt Carly to find out.

The idea of living with Carly had been appealing, but at the same time, Spencer hadn't wanted his kid sister, fresh out of college, to have to pull in enough for both of them, because Spencer couldn't pay his own way. He'd been applying to restaurant and retail jobs when Carly had approached him about this opportunity, to move to an old summer camp in the

woods with all their friends, where it would cost a lot less, with their resources pooled, to pay for housing. Spencer had jumped at the chance.

And now that they're actually moving in, Spencer can empty out his storage unit.

He'd paid for the unit up through the first few days of June, and he is going to get his money's worth, damn it. But on the last day of his storage unit's rental, he asks Freddie to drive him down to help empty it out. Freddie, like the good friend he is, accepts.

Over breakfast that day, Spencer asks Carly if she knows which cabin she's going to work out of yet. Though she, Sam, and Cat have a double-sized cabin, with four rooms and two bathrooms and a solid wall between the two halves that they plan to add a door to, Carly has suggested that she might prefer a separate place to go for some quiet, and to keep their residence feeling like a *residence*. As she doesn't have a job yet, whatever Carly might work on in her workspace is theoretical.

Perhaps that's why she doesn't seem to be prioritizing making this decision. "I don't know yet," she tells Spencer.

"But it's probably going to be the one near your living cabin, right?" he presses.

She narrows her eyes at him, clearly thinking he's being nosy. Which, obviously he is. "I don't know," she repeats. "I haven't decided yet."

"Okay, okay." Spencer holds his hands up in front of him defensively. "I was just asking."

Later that morning, he and Freddie head down into the city to his old storage unit. Freddie begins to get concerned when they stop to pick up a small box truck at a nearby Lez-Haul. "Um, how much is in this storage unit?"

"Just some things," Spencer answers evasively, getting into the truck while Freddie stands next to his car. "Follow me, it's only a few blocks away!" He closes his door before Freddie can ask any more questions.

When they get to the storage unit, though, Freddie clearly has been thinking of plenty of questions, which he voices now. "If there's enough that we need this truck, why don't we have movers to help us?"

"Because I don't have any more money to pay movers after they emptied my apartment," Spencer replies honestly.

"Then... why didn't we bring more help? I'm not even a *werew*—" He cuts himself off, looking around them guiltily. They've gotten so used to being open about things at the campsite that Spencer can't really blame him. Besides, there's no one in earshot.

"Because I'm trying to be *discreet*," Spencer says in a hushed tone.

Freddie rolls his eyes. "Discreet about *what*?" he asks.

In answer, Spencer unlocks his storage unit and rolls up the door. Some things are in boxes, but there are enough bits and pieces lining the walls, completely uncovered, for Freddie to understand.

Freddie stares. “You *didn’t*.”

Spencer just smiles. “Come on, help me load all this into the truck!”

Freddie shakes his head slowly. “I was ready to kill you, but I get it.”

“Good. Then grab the other end of this thing.” Spencer gestures. Freddie finally seems to shake himself off and start helping.

Freddie’s right; he isn’t a werewolf. He seems exhausted when they’re finished loading. Spencer passes him a bottle of water, which he gratefully gulps down.

“Do me a favor,” Spencer requests. “Text Sam and tell her to keep Carly distracted for the next, like, three or four hours.”

“Yeah, *that’s* reasonable,” Freddie mutters, but he takes out his phone to do just that.

“Okay! We’ll grab some Inside Out Burger and then you can follow me back,” Spencer tells him.

“When we get back, can we ask for help *then*?” Freddie asks.

“We’re being discreet,” Spencer reminds him, making Freddie groan.

Back at the camp, Spencer pulls the box truck up next to the cabin he’d been asking Carly about. The camp is quiet; it can feel deserted sometimes, even when people are around, something that can easily be determined by whose cars are parked. Beck, Trina, and Sinjin are all gone, but everyone else is apparently around, probably in their cabins, building furniture or unpacking boxes or job hunting.

Spencer glances at his sister’s cabin warily, then whispers to Freddie. “Okay, we’ve got to unload *quickly*.”

Freddie’s expression is pained. “I’ll go as *quick as I can*,” he hisses back sourly.

There’s no sign of Carly as they unload the box truck. There’s no sign of anyone, actually. Spencer drives the truck back over toward his art hut once they’ve unloaded it while Freddie just sprawls on the floor and stares at the ceiling in misery. He’s still in the exact same position when Spencer gets back and urges him to help set the place up.

They work for the next several hours inside the cabin. When they finish, it’s time for dinner in the community building; Cat has made a very large portion of pasta. Cat’s pasta has been a popular option since they moved here. It’s inexpensive and easy to make enough for everyone. Though she serves her meatballs on the side so that Melanie and Burf, the resident vegetarians, can eat.

Carly isn't oblivious, however. Spencer had tried to park the box truck behind his art hut, but it had been impossible to obscure it completely. "I saw that truck near your house, Spencer," Carly says to him. It's kind of funny that they call each other's spaces "houses", but it's the easiest way to refer to them, Spencer supposes. "I thought you'd already moved everything out of your apartment."

"I did," Spencer replies. "I was clearing out my storage unit."

"Ooh, finally!" Carly says, sounding pleased. "That's great!"

"It is," Spencer agrees.

"Where have you been all day?" Melanie asks Freddie. "At the gym?" she guesses, taking in his evident exhaustion.

"I'll tell you later," Freddie murmurs.

After dinner, Spencer suggests to Carly, "Hey! I want to show you what I did with that one cabin near you."

Carly frowns. "Oh. Is that why you kept asking me about it? You could've just told me you wanted to use it."

Spencer ignores this and just tells her, "I think you'll really like it."

"Sure," Carly replies, a bit unenthusiased.

Spencer can hear Freddie quietly tell Sam, "You'll want to see this, too," as they start walking back toward the cabins.

Evidently, there's enough intrigue at Spencer's pitch that *everyone* seems to be following along, wondering what he might've done with the cabin space. It makes Spencer even more excited and proud of what he's accomplished.

"Okay," he says, stopping outside the cabin. "Kiddo, I think you should go in first," he tells his sister.

Carly looks a little reluctant, and glances at Sam uncertainly. She shrugs. Carly pushes open the door.

"Wh—*What?!!*" Carly shouts.

"What is it?" Sam asks, pushing forward to follow her inside. "Oh, *no way!*"

"Yes, way!" Spencer can't contain his glee. More people are beginning to make their way toward the door curiously, so Spencer follows his sister and Sam inside, closely followed by Freddie.

Inside the cabin, the room is laid out in as close to a replica as possible of the old *iCarly* studio that had been the third floor of the Shay's Seattle apartment for so many years. He and

Freddie had to rely on their memories, but Spencer is confident they got it right. There's no elevator, of course, and no arching stained glass window, but the furniture and decorations are all there.

In the doorway, their other friends take turns peering through, exclaiming in surprise, and explaining to those who didn't used to watch the webshow what, exactly, they're all looking at, but they respectfully keep their distance, letting Carly, Sam, Freddie, and Spencer stand together in a replica of the space that had meant so much to them.

"Where did this *come* fr—" But Carly seems to figure out the answer to her own question before she's even finished asking it. "The storage unit."

Spencer nods. "Yep."

"You brought all that down from Seattle and *held onto it*?" Carly asks in awe.

"That's why I didn't want to give that unit up!" Spencer explains.

"Spencer, I...I can't *believe* this! How long were you going to hold onto this?"

"As long as I could. As long as you needed me to," he tells her. "When I moved, I made a choice for you. I got rid of your childhood home. And with that, I got rid of your studio. The place that made you, well, *you*." He shakes his head. "It wasn't really fair of me. I know that. And so I thought I'd at least bring that down with me. So that someday, maybe, you could at least have that part back again."

"Spencer!" Carly flings herself at him in a hug. "I don't even know what to say," she mumbles.

"Maybe start with thank you?" Freddie suggests. "As in, thank you Freddie and Spencer for sweating all day in the sun picking all this stuff up and putting in all the work to recreate our studio?"

"You, too?" Carly asks in awe, flinging herself at Freddie, too. "*Thank you!* Thank you both!"

Sam has been quiet, but she can't seem to keep her eyes off everything familiar in the space: the swirly carpet, the seats made out of the front half of a car, the traffic light and walk sign and hanging moon and star lights, the signs and stools and disco balls and trunks. "So," she finally asks Carly, "What do you want to do with it?"

"I—I don't know, I'd just wanted my own workspace, but..."

"Maybe it's time to film another episode?" Sam suggests. It's been a while, Spencer knows. Freddie had been spending more of his breaks at Stanford the last couple years of school, because of Melanie (and maybe Robbie, too), and any trips down to Los Angeles had tended to be social in nature.

"Oh, it's time," Freddie agrees. "I didn't do all this for us to do *nothing*."

“Oh, please, all you did was move this stuff,” Spencer scoffs. “*I* held onto it for over a year!”

“It was hard to move!” Freddie defends himself.

“I would *love* to see how you film this,” Melanie says from the doorway, shyly stepping inside, as if she’s not sure she’s allowed. “I always wondered about the behind the scenes.”

Sam seems to light up when she sees her sister. “Wait a minute,” she says. “We could use Melanie.”

“Use me?” Melanie repeats, sounding slightly nervous.

“Like, wouldn’t it be funny if she kept appearing in the background of all of our shots, and would duck out of sight every time Carls and I turned around for some reason? I don’t think our viewers know I have a twin.”

“That would be *hilarious*,” Carly replies. “And we just, like, wouldn’t address her at all throughout the whole episode and wait for the comments.”

“You’d want me to be *in* it?” Melanie asks, sounding nervous.

“You’ll be great,” Freddie assures her.

“I’m honored,” Melanie replies genuinely.

Spencer grins and begins to leave the studio, leaving his sister and her friends to plan their next broadcast of the webshow that made them famous. Their other friends, appearing pleased and proud, begin to drift away as well.

“And of course,” Carly says when he’s halfway out the door, “Now that my brother is here, we can bring back Baby Spencer!”

Spencer winces. “I *knew* I should’ve thrown out that crib.”

-

They start working on the new *iCarly* right away. Because, why not? For the most part, they’re doing odds jobs while looking for actual sustainable career opportunities; Freddie has had a few interviews for computer science work, but he can afford to be a bit choosy. Cat has been commissioned to make a few costumes. Sam is the one who works fairly regularly, when Dice isn’t at school.

And Melanie, like Freddie, is still looking for work. She’s trying to land a government job (“They offer great benefits,” she keeps saying), though Sam knows no matter what job she eventually takes, her twin will probably make about five times as much as she does.

Oh, well. Sam wasn’t put on this earth to *work*. She was put here to please women and make people laugh. Or, that’s what she tells herself.

It's weird having Melanie work with them on the show. Both because of her relationship with Freddie (which is still gross) and because of the fact that she and Sam have barely had any kind of relationship as adults. Even last winter, when Sam had asked Melanie to come down so they could spend some time celebrating a holiday together for once...it hadn't quite worked out that way. Faced with her twin, it had felt too *weird* to pretend they had a deep connection that made the idea of creating holiday memories meaningful. It had been easier to just be distantly polite.

And then, after all that effort, when Melanie hadn't even wanted to *change* with them all in the mountains...yeah, that seemed stupid to Sam. She couldn't respect her for that choice.

But Melanie is doing well on their episode. Freddie signals to her when to hide, and to Sam and Carly when to turn to look at something, or do something, and barely miss her. Sam feels certain it's going to cause a buzz. It's going to be hilarious. She wonders how long they can get away with using her sister as a quiet, mysterious background clone before they actually have to introduce her and, heaven forbid, let her be a regular part of the broadcast. Sam doesn't necessarily want that, though she knows Carly would welcome Melanie. She just hopes Melanie will have better things to do by then.

Maybe they all will. *iCarly* might have to become an occasional hobby once they all start working regularly.

As they finish up working on the show for the day, they begin to head up to the community building for dinner. Melanie lingers behind Freddie, seeming to be waiting for Carly and Sam. Sam figures she wants to talk to Carly, since they've always maintained more of a friendship than she's ever had with her sister, but it's Sam that Melanie speaks to when they catch up to her.

"I just wanted to thank you for letting me be a part of *iCarly*," she says to her sister.

Sam grunts in response. "Don't have to thank me. I'm not the one who runs the show." She glances at Carly, but Carly is...walking faster. Catching up with Freddie. Leaving her with just her sister. She wants to grab Carly's arm to tug her back, but her girlfriend is too quick for her.

"But you're the one who suggested it," Melanie points out.

"Yeah? So?"

"So I know you just said it because it'd be funny, but this has been really fun for me."

"Glad to hear it."

Sam doesn't mean to just brush off her sister. It's just that she doesn't know what kind of relationship they're supposed to have when they have nothing in common. Now that neither of them have to deal with their mother anymore, they've lost just about their only bond.

Kinda sad, when Sam thinks about it. She also thinks it isn't fair for Melanie to have such strong feelings about their mother when she *barely* grew up with her, when she was *clearly*

the favorite.

Her sister's voice breaks through Sam's ruminations. "Sam?"

"Yeah?"

Melanie clasps her hands in front of herself. There's a nervousness to the way she twists her fingers that baffles Sam. "For the full moon tomorrow," she begins. "I was thinking that maybe I'd like to...change with you all."

Sam's first reaction is anger, and she can't help but lash out. "So first you want to be in my webshow, and *now* you want to be a werewolf with *my* friends again," she says sarcastically. "Don't I get *anything* to myself when you're around?"

An unmistakable flicker of hurt crosses Melanie's face. But she doesn't back down. Because of her flowery exterior, Sam can forget that her twin is *her twin*, and shares Sam's same inner strength and stubbornness. But unlike Sam, Melanie doesn't hit back. She never has, not even when they were children. "I'm not trying to *take* anything from you," she responds in a heartfelt tone.

"Well, excuse me for not rolling out the welcome mat," Sam bites. "All you've ever done is shame me for my choices by trying to be as different from me as possible, and *now* you want to explore the Sam side of life. Well, I'm not about to be your guide."

"I've never tried to be *your* opposite," Melanie argues. She pinches the bridge of her nose, somehow making it look elegant. "Look, *obviously* we're different," Melanie acknowledges, gesturing between them. Sam glances down to take in her own comfortable jeans and boots, her dark racerback tank top with a motorcycle on it, her plaid button down shirt with the sleeves cut off, and her twin's strappy wedges, her flowy skirt, her loose short-sleeved blouse. Even the way Melanie wears her hair is different, in a ponytail that manages to make their unruly hair look smooth and stylish.

"Obviously," Sam mutters.

"We're so different, you have a girlfriend who has another girlfriend, and I have a boyfriend who has another boyfriend," Melanie jokes. Sam's lip twitches, but she refuses to let Melanie have this. "But it's not an *attack* on you that I'm different from you," Melanie finishes.

Sam folds her arms. She doesn't know when they stopped walking. "Well, sorry if it doesn't feel that way when I always come out of the situation looking worse."

"The only person I'm trying not to be is our mother!" Melanie exclaims abruptly.

Sam blinks, then almost laughs. "You're *nothing* like her."

"Neither are you," Melanie tells her.

If Sam were anyone else, she thinks, this would probably make her cry. Instead, she takes a steadying breath. "I know," she answers.



But she doesn't always know. Especially not when Melanie is around, to be a direct comparison. And maybe Melanie senses that, because she continues, "You and I are very different. But we're opposites of our mom. From opposite ways. You...you're *spirited*," she says, and Sam knows she's trying to find a good way to say *aggressive*. "And you only use your strength to take care of those you love. You're a hard worker. You just need a good reason to set out to do something, and trying to save up to live with your girlfriends? That was reason enough for you. Every action I see from you is motivated by love. Doing *iCarly*? That introduced the world to the girl you loved. Babysitting? That allowed you to stay close to the other girl you loved. Eating all that meat?" Melanie pauses. "Actually, I'm not sure what that does for you."

"It tastes good. Not that you'd know."

"My point is that love is the defining force of your life. And hatred and resentment is our mother's." Melanie shakes her head. "I think, out of the two of us, you're the *least* like her."

Sam chuckles. "Please. You went to college, you're going to get a high-paying job, you've managed to keep a guy for more than three weeks. And you're, you know." *Actually pretty*. "Not trashy."

Melanie's lip twists. "But I've spent so long defining myself as *not* her, I don't think I've even put as much distance between us as you have with her. You're...living your life. I'm still trying to prove that mine is worth something."

Sam tilts her head to the side. "Have you been talking to a therapist or something?"

Melanie shrugs and doesn't answer. Instead, she says, "I'm not trying to take anything from you. All I want is...to feel like you're actually my sister. And not just some stranger who shares my face."

There's no fight left in Sam. Because when it comes down to it, she wants this with Melanie, too. It's just— "I don't even know where to begin with this."

"Me, neither."

Sam considers something else. "I *did* kind of judge you a lot for refusing to change into a werewolf," she admits. "Seems kind of stupid to do the same thing now that you actually want to do it."

"It's not actually the first time in a while that I'll be changing," Melanie admits. "I...changed in front of Freddie. At school."

"You *did*?"

She nods. "He's really fascinated by it."

"Well, sure. He would be. He's a nerd." This makes Melanie smile. Before she can think better of it, Sam says, "You really love him, don't you?"

Melanie's breath catches. She composes her expression. "Yes. But he doesn't know it yet."

“Oh.” They start walking toward the community building again. “You should...probably tell him,” Sam advises, wary of offering any kind of guidance to her sister’s relationship with *Freddie Benson*, of all people.

Melanie nods faintly. “I know,” she says quietly.

“You can change with us,” Sam blurts as they get close to the door.

“Yeah?” Melanie grins.

“It’s not like I could stop you, anyway. But...I mean, of course you can. It’ll be awesome.”

Melanie nods slowly. “I know it will.”

The next night is a Thursday, and the first night of the full moon, and the excitement is palpable in the air. This is the first time since December that a big group of them gets to change together. It’s even been a while since Sam has changed with Tori, and their monthly ritual of meeting as wolves had been years in the making, but the last few semesters of college had really thrown a wrench into plans, especially as they tried to work more people into their Shadow Creek Park schedules.

But now, they don’t have to *go* anywhere. They can change exactly where they live, without fear of discovery or persecution.

“I can’t wait to run through a *forest* again,” Carly says enthusiastically as they get undressed in their cabin.

“It’s gonna be great,” Sam agrees. As much as she’d loved Shadow Creek Park, it had been kind of a long stretch of nothing. Well, that isn’t entirely true. A desert is as alive as any other part of the world. But Sam and Carly grew up among trees, with Spencer taking them to forests to explore and romp. The cabin they’d gone to in December at least had the right atmosphere, the right scents in the air, but they’d been limited to the yard. Now, their property spans acres of forest surrounding the developed land they live on.

Cat sits on the edge of their king bed, swinging her feet happily. “I’m just glad you won’t have to sleep outside anymore,” she comments.

“Yeah, it’s kind of all the best parts of being a werewolf all rolled into one,” Carly agrees. “We can go outside and have a great time and then later on, come back home and snuggle with Cat and go to sleep.”

“Maybe we’ll have to sleep in a wolfpile somewhere, sometime,” Sam suggests. “For old time’s sake.”

Carly chuckles. “It sounds great until you remember you might wake up with someone’s bare ass in your face.”

Sam wrinkles her nose. “A wolfpile, but with an alarm clock before dawn,” she amends.

“That I can get behind,” Carly grins. “I mean, I got used to seeing Tori naked, which wasn’t hard, because she’s hot. But some of our friends? I don’t need to go there.”

Cat tilts her head to the side. “You think Tori is hot?” she asks.

Carly chuckles. Sam can hear a trace of nervousness. “I mean, objectively. Don’t you?”

“She’s very pretty,” Cat answers, her tone strangely neutral.

Sam doesn’t know why they’re tiptoeing around anything. “Yeah, yeah, hot people are hot. Come on, Carls, get ready.”

“I am!” Carly answers in mild exasperation as she takes off her bra.

“I haven’t seen you two change for a while,” Cat comments.

That much is true. At Shadow Creek Park, they’d always change in the woods with Tori, and at their old apartment, they’d typically change in the bedroom while Cat stayed in the front of the house, usually cooking or engaged in some other task to prepare the space to host wolves. But it’s not as though Cat doesn’t know what changing is like. Still, “You can always close your eyes if it gets too weird,” Carly reminds her.

“I don’t mind,” Cat assures them both. “I like that you’re okay with me watching.”

And only a few short minutes later, Sam and Carly are both wolves, and Cat is beaming at them from the bed. She hops down to pet them both, but doesn’t linger, because she understands their excitement. She stands by the cabin door. “Are you ready?” she asks them, in much the same tone as someone asks a dog if they want to go for a walk.

Sam growls impatiently. Cat looks them each in the eye, then opens the door.

She and Carly both shoot out the door, knocking their hips against the doorframe as they both try to push through at once. That would probably leave a mark if they weren’t going to heal up in ten hours or so. Sam can hear Cat laughing as she follows them, as she and Carly make a beeline to the amphitheater.

There’s a large firepit in front of the stage of the amphitheater, and Sinjin and Burf are tending to it. Not because it’s cold out; it’s June, after all. From what Beck says, the weather here is likely to be similar to Los Angeles, though probably not quite as hot and not quite as dry, and they may even see snow in the winter. The nights so far have been pleasantly crisp once the sun is long gone, but the fire isn’t for warmth. It’s for a sense of community, a sense of ritual. A gathering place for the humans to enjoy while the wolves they care about frolic.

Dice and Goomer are the first wolves that Sam sees. Dice had just finished his finals to round out his junior year of high school, and so he has the freedom of summer laid out before him (though he assures Sam they have a lot of money-making opportunities ahead of them). Because of school, Dice hasn’t been up to the camp as much as he’d like, but Sam is happy that he’ll be able to spend time here over the summer; he’s already chosen his own cabin, close to Goomer’s gym, to move into when he finishes high school. She’s glad that she and

her friends can provide him with a safe space to change, to explore being a wolf, something that is challenging in the apartment he shares with his mom and his aunt. It reminds Sam of the way Spencer used to ensure she and Carly experienced safety and freedom to change, themselves.

Tori bounds out of the darkness behind them, tail wagging fiercely, and they greet her, with huffs and barks and leaps of joy. Spencer arrives by barreling into Goomer, immediately starting a wrestling match between the two largest wolves, while Dice skips away to stay out of range of their tussle.

Robbie arrives, quiet as the night and almost as dark, and Tori barks a greeting at him, inviting him to be bold with them, the way he was months ago in the mountains. His tail begins to wag uncertainly, still held low, until Carly nudges his neck with her nose encouragingly.

Then Trina arrives, and Sam yaps at her, mostly because she can't laugh. But it's laughter that fills her chest and her mind, with no natural way to express it other than to wag her tail *hard* and huff out exhalations of pleasure.

Because Trina is wearing what looks almost like pajamas, covering her legs and torso and leaving her head, paws, and tail exposed. The garment is colorful: swirls of purple and red and orange. It certainly catches the eye.

And Trina looks *proud*. She struts in, head held high, tail held straight out, looking extremely pleased with herself.

Sam thinks they're all having the same reaction as they stop and stare, then turn absolutely rambunctious, barking and jumping and tumbling around in absolute delight. But Trina appears completely unfazed. She touches noses with Tori, who whimpers at the sight of her sister, and the two of them start chasing each other playfully, like they apparently haven't for *years*.

And then, Melanie arrives.

Sam smells her before she sees her, though she can't say exactly *why* she knows what her sister's wolf smells like. It's just a certainty, deep in her bones, that Melanie is near.

Sam seeks her out and—there she is. Standing at the edge of the amphitheater, the golden tones of her fur lit up by the firelight. Sam doesn't spend a ton of time staring into mirrors as a wolf (or even as a human, for that matter), but she knows right away that this wolf looks *just* like her.

But here Melanie stands, tail held low, looking around at everyone uncertainly before locking eyes with Sam.

Sam feels herself bristle. She realizes she's *angry*. She feels a deep sense of *completion*, like a piece of herself that has been missing has finally been returned, even though she hadn't even really *known* it was missing, but confronted with it, she can't understand why it hasn't

been here all along. And it makes her sad and angry and upset and all kinds of feelings that wolves barely have words for, and have limited ways to express.

But she realizes, just as quickly, with her human intuition that it isn't Melanie she's angry at.

It's their mother.

Their mother, who had managed to alienate them both when it came time for them to change, leaving Sam alone and unprepared while trying to force her own agenda on Melanie. Their mother, who managed to alienate them from *each other*, by literally separating them with a full continent between them, by constantly comparing them to one another. It's only now that Sam realizes that maybe Melanie wasn't sent to boarding school because their mother loved her more. Maybe she was sent to boarding school to keep the twins powerless, to keep them from working together, against her.

As it is, this is the first time that Sam has ever seen Melanie as a wolf, and there's an achingly sweet sense of familiarity, a powerful sense of time lost, and a renewed sense of possibility for the future.

Sam lunges at her sister. Melanie meets her halfway. They sniff each other vigorously, their tails start wagging, and they bury their faces into the thick fur at the scruff of one another's necks, and Sam realizes they *absolutely* know each other. Their connection is bone deep, as vital as the blood they share. But it's not just because they are family in a literal, genetic sense. It's because they are family because they've *chosen* to be. They've chosen to share the same friends, the same loved ones, the same home turf.

Melanie had said that Sam's driving force in life is love. And Sam knows, in this moment, that she loves her sister. That she would do anything for her.

And she knows just as simply and easily that Melanie feels the exact same way about her.

And mere moments later, Sam's hackles rise at the sound of an unfamiliar vehicle making its way down the road toward their camp, and with an abrupt realization like ice water pouring over her, Sam knows, somehow, that she is about to need to defend her family with everything she has.

# Rainbows

**June 2017**

The driver of the car has taken time to plot revenge.

It's not like it's been that hard. These people practically *advertise* exactly what they're up to. You just have to be in the know to be able to see it.

The driver's been in the know for a long time. If people don't pay attention to you, they don't know how much you actually *see* what goes on around you.

Especially if you never wanted to be on the outside looking in. If you wanted to be more of a part of things. More than an afterthought. But you're not.

At first, the driver accepted that. Maybe their lives were moving in different directions, that maybe it was a part of what happens when people finish high school. But it gradually became more and more clear that it wasn't just being an afterthought. It was being *used*. Taken advantage of. And no one really bothered to find out what was really going on with the driver personally.

Instead, they'd all just left. Leaving the driver behind.

But again, the driver is smarter than any of them know. And has them figured out.

They've started a werewolf cult in the forest. Yeah, the driver knows about werewolves. That part got figured out a while ago, became a frustrating waiting game, waiting to be officially let in on the secret, but...it never happened. That's fine. That's whatever.

But when they started gathering forces, setting up a system to make *more* of them, well. That's where the line has to be drawn.

Someone has to stop them. And there's only one person who can, because there's no one else to rely on. They're all in on it.

It hadn't taken much to find exactly where they are. A little bit of research, some documents in the public record, and the answer is easily accessible. It's also obvious how many of them are in on this. They're all connected, it's easy to see when you look.

The driver of the car knows *exactly* who will be there to defend this cult.

It's not malice that drives this journey. Not really. It's maybe a small part of it, the pain of being left out, the agony of being left behind. But mostly, it's because it's the right thing to do. When you're privy to a secret that could get people hurt or killed...you have to act.

That's what it means to be a good person, right?

The wolves gather as if to make a shield in front of the humans at the amphitheater, but then Freddie hisses, “You guys need to stay out of sight!”

Jade isn’t sure she agrees. From the way the wolves react, they feel the same thrum of apprehension in the air that she does. In the dim light of a sky still alight behind the hills and trees even as the sun has sunk below the horizon, the presence of a strange car that they can hear better than they can see is...off-putting.

“Maybe it’s someone who took a wrong turn,” Beck suggests.

“I told you to get that sign up,” Jade tells him, frustrated. Sam and Cat had designed a sign to put at the start of the road to the camp naming it “Moonflower Meadows” and, more importantly, had put “Private Property, Do Not Enter, No Trespassing” at the bottom.

“I’m *going* to!” Beck insists.

Cat moves a little closer to Jade. “What if it’s not someone who’s lost?” she asks.

Jade doesn’t answer right away, because she feels like Cat is probably right. She doesn’t know why. She just feels unsettled. She grabs Cat’s hand briefly to squeeze it. “It’ll be alright,” she assures her.

But privately, Jade is looking around at the people around her, the ones who aren’t wolf-shaped: herself and Cat, Beck, Freddie, Andre, Sinjin, and Burf. *Yeah, okay.* Not exactly her dream team when it comes to defending herself. Freddie and Andre are both pretty strong, but Freddie seems like a pacifist, and Andre talks a good game, but Jade isn’t convinced he could actually draw blood in a fight. Beck works out, but Jade doesn’t think he even knows how to throw a punch.

No, the people she’d *actually* want to back her up in a fight are currently wolf-shaped, hiding among trees, behind rocks, behind the stage of the amphitheater, alongside nearby buildings. They’d really scattered when Freddie told them to hide. *Great.*

Jade wonders why she ever stopped carrying scissors in her boot. She’s been a fool, got too complacent. She should never again forget that the world is actually terrible. Instead, she has the long rubber purple bone that she throws for the werewolves to fetch. Not the worst improvised weapon, she supposes.

The car approaches the amphitheater, headlights shining onto them. They stand around the fire, close together but not shoulder to shoulder, all staring toward the car. The car shuts off, but the headlights stay on, and the driver’s side door opens.

“H-hey!” Freddie tries, his voice shaking slightly. “Are you lost?”

“No,” the voice replies, calmly and confidently. “I’m exactly where I need to be. Don’t move.”

The command turns Jade to ice. In the back of her mind, she thinks that the simple terror of a confident, dangerous intruder might be difficult to translate into film, but would be great to

probe into.

The figure steps closer, holding something Jade can't quite identify, but with the way her night is going, she feels a dull, terrible certainty that it's a gun. She assumes the headlights are meant to disrupt their ability to identify the intruder, and it seems to be working.

"What do you want?" Burf asks. His tone is braver than Jade would have guessed possible for him. He's holding Sinjin's arm, placing himself just in front of his best friend.

"I see you all decided not to change tonight, huh?" the figure asks.

"Change what?" Andre asks, but immediately seems to regret opening his mouth.

But before the figure can answer, Freddie speaks. "*Gibby*?" he asks in an awed voice.

The voice laughs bitterly. "Ahh, my old friend Freddie Benson. I guess you haven't forgotten me, huh?" The figure steps closer, down the slope toward the bonfire, and finally, is illuminated by the firelight.

And, yep, there stands Gibby, looking pretty much the same as in the old *iCarly* broadcasts Jade had perused years ago, except he's taller than Jade would have guessed. Actually, he's kind of imposing, especially with the stern expression on his face as he looks at Freddie.

Off to the side, she hears Sinjin gasp and whisper to Burf, "We're in the presence of a legend."

Gibby's face twitches into something like a nasty smile. "A legend, huh?" he says, clearly hearing them. "Well, maybe so. Or maybe I'm about to become one."

"What are you doing here?" Freddie asks him.

"I'm shocked that I'd have to explain myself to someone as smart as you," Gibby tells Freddie scornfully.

Freddie glances at the others, clearly not liking the fact that he's on the spot here, though because he knows Gibby best, it seems to make sense. But as he seems to have balked a little, Jade comes to the rescue, "Well, maybe you should enlighten the rest of us."

Cat adds her own flair as she giggles and adds, "I'm not *nearly* as smart as Freddie, so I'm a little lost."

It seems to work, somewhat, as Gibby's expression softens a little as he looks at Cat. *Great*, he's the type that responds to feminine wiles. Time to start channeling Jessica Rabbit or some other femme fatale. Luckily, that's in Jade's wheelhouse. Too bad she's not wearing something more low-cut.

"Okay," Gibby states, his tone sounding sweetly condescending. "I'll spell it out for you, sweetheart. You're in a cult, and if you haven't been changed yet, I'll rescue you. Otherwise, I'm here to put you down."



“A *cult*?” Freddie asks incredulously.

“What’s he mean, put us down?” Andre asks warily at the same time.

“Ridiculous,” Jade scoffs. Sometimes she just can’t help herself. “The only way I’d be in a cult is if I was running it.” Beck shoots her an *are you serious?* look. “What?” she asks him.

“Gibbs,” Freddie says soothingly. Gibby’s head whips back toward him, glaring. “Look, I’m sorry, man, but I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Gibby raises his gun to the sky. Jade braces herself for a warning shot, but it turns out he’s just...pointing. “Look up there!” he shouts. “What do you see?”

“The sky?” Andre suggests.

“What’s *in* the sky?” Gibby asks.

“Stars?” Beck suggests. Gibby scowls.

“The moon?” Freddie guesses.

“The moon,” Gibby repeats. “What *kind* of moon?”

“A...full one?”

“Look at you go!” Gibby lowers his arm. “So what I’m saying is...where are the werewolves?”

Freddie looks at the others helplessly. Beck tries to look stern as he replies, “We don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Don’t you *lie* to me!” Gibby shouts, pointing the gun at Beck now. Beck holds his hands up to try to de-escalate the situation. Gibby stares at him and takes a breath. “I’ve got silver bullets in this thing,” he informs them. “And I don’t want to waste them on humans. So I’m going to ask again. Where are the werewolves? I know you’re here!” he shouts.

Jade can hear Burf telling Sinjin quietly, “There’s no actual werewolf aversion to silver, but any bullet in the right place could kill them.” Great. They’re dealing with a deranged former friend who could actually get their friends and lovers *killed*. Beside her, Cat is shaking. Jade grabs her hand reassuringly.

“How do you even know about werewolves?” Freddie asks Gibby, apparently beyond trying to pretend otherwise.

Gibby laughs. “I’ve known for a *long* time. You guys just never really paid attention to me. You just thought I was good for a laugh and were just always wrapped up in your own little drama, never realizing that there were more people around than just the three of you.”

“Yeah, but...” Freddie tries. “*I* only found out, like, a year ago!”

Gibby looks *stunned*. He blinks and stares at Freddie, looks him up and down. “Is that when they changed you?” he asks in a low voice.

“No!” Freddie denies immediately, shaking his head. “No, I’m human, buddy, believe me.”

“If there’s a way to change a human to a werewolf, we don’t know about it,” Burf pipes up in a small voice. Gibby turns his attention to him and Burf looks kind of petrified, but adds, “I’ve been trying to figure out a way for years.”

“*We’ve* been trying,” Sinjin adds, apparently not wanting Burf to get the brunt of Gibby’s attention.

“Just for me!” Burf adds. “Since I have werewolf heritage. But there’s no easy way, man. The folklore methods don’t work.”

Gibby seems to consider this information. He looks between all of them, then finally looks back at Freddie. “Then why are you all here?”

“Because we live here?” Freddie phrases this as a question.

“But *why*?” Gibby presses. “Why would you move to the middle of the woods with a bunch of *werewolves* if you *aren’t* in some kind of cult?”

“Because we love them!” It’s Cat who says it. She’s trembling, but there’s a fire in her eyes as she looks at Gibby. “Your old friends, Carly and Sam? I love them both, very much. That’s why I’m here with them. We just wanted a place where we could be left alone.”

Gibby shakes his head. It seems like he can’t even believe it. But then he scoffs. “*Friends*,” he mutters scornfully. He turns his attention back to Freddie. “When we were in high school, one time I was bored. You were down at the Groovy Smoothie trying to do something with T-Bo’s computer system, so I left and went to Carly’s. I rode the elevator up, came out in the living room, and didn’t see anybody. So I went upstairs, nope, no one in Carly’s room, so I went up to the studio, and you know what I saw?”

“What?” Freddie asks warily.

“Through the window on the door, I saw two werewolves.”

“*That’s* how you found out?”

Gibby nods. “Course, I didn’t know that’s what they were. I just thought they were weird-looking dogs for a minute. But I didn’t see Carly and Sam, so I went back downstairs. I thought I’d take the elevator back down to the ground floor, but as I was waiting for it, Spencer came out of his room. He looked shocked to see me and clearly thought I’d just gotten there. He told me Carly and Sam weren’t home, and when I tried to hang out with him, he acted all cagey and weird, so I left. And that’s when I started putting pieces together.”

“And you just *never said anything*?” Freddie asks.

“I kept *waiting* for someone to say something to me!” Gibby replies heatedly. “I thought, you know, if we were all really friends, that someday I’d be let in on the secret. Of course, I thought you knew at the time. But then time went on, and I was just always on the outside looking in, and then Carly left, and then Sam left, and then you just never wanted to hang out anymore, and that’s when I realized that I really didn’t matter to *any* of you. That I’d been a *fool*.”

“That’s not true!” Freddie insists. He looks desperate, helpless. “I was *depressed as hell* when Carly and Sam left. I didn’t want to hang out with *anybody*!”

“You still hung out with Spencer,” Gibby accuses. And from the way Freddie doesn’t have an answer, it seems that Gibby is probably right.

Andre reluctantly tries a different tactic, “Okay, but, Carly and Sam didn’t tell Freddie, either. They didn’t leave just *you* out.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Gibby insists. “It’s just one way I learned I didn’t matter to them.”

“This is stupid,” Jade growls. She can’t help it. She feels certain that if Gibby were any kind of threat to them, that gun would’ve gone off by now. “Look, who cares what happened in high school?” she asks scathingly. “It was years ago now.” She looks over toward Sinjin and Burf and decides it’s easy enough to make an object lesson out of them. “I couldn’t stand those two in high school,” she informs Gibby, “And now I live near them. Because bonds change as we all grow up. Some people move closer. Some people drift apart. It’s no one’s fault.”

“Yeah, now we’re very good friends,” Sinjin adds hopefully.

“Don’t push it,” Jade tells him.

“It’s no one’s fault?” Gibby repeats in disbelief. “It’s no one’s fault that I was left out? Forgotten about?”

“That’s not how it went!” Freddie insists. “Carly was thousands of miles away! Sam barely talked to me for a year! And Gib…it’s not like you reached out to me, either.”

There must be some truth to that, because Gibby falls silent. He stares at his feet. The gun just points at the ground.

Behind him, Jade can see the low, lupine figures of wolves, quietly surrounding him at the edges of the amphitheater, ready to make a move to defend the humans if they must. Jade catches the eye of the one nearest her—she can’t actually tell who it is—and barely shakes her head. If this erupts in violence, someone could end up dead.

“Look, I’m sorry we lost touch,” Freddie tells Gibby genuinely. “I was dealing with some stuff, but I could have been a better friend.”

“S’okay,” Gibby manages, sounding close to tears.

“But I can’t figure out...*why* did you think we were in a *cult*?”

“Because you’re all hiding out somewhere, because of this whole secret werewolf thing, because werewolves are bloodthirsty killers! I figured you needed to stay off the grid to feed on people to *hide*.”

“Wouldn’t it make more sense to stay in the city where people disappear all the time?” Beck suggests.

Freddie ignores this and asks Gibby, “When you saw Carly and Sam in the studio. What were they doing?”

Gibby frowns and seems to be thinking about it. “Wrestling, I guess. Playing?”

Freddie nods. “That’s about all that werewolves do,” he informs Gibby.

“And that’s a good thing,” Jade adds. She takes a chance. She thinks they’ve got him. “Because you’re surrounded right now. And if our wolf friends really *were* killers...you’d already be dead.”

Gibby spins around, but seems to almost immediately blind himself in his own headlights. He panics, flails, holds his arms in front of himself, but he isn’t aiming the gun at anybody.

“You want to see what they’re really like?” Jade asks, moving closer to Gibby, who turns around and looks surprised to see her right there. She holds out the purple dog bone, and her other empty hand. “I’ll trade you.”

Gibby stares at the dog toy. “What *is* that?”

“Throw it,” Jade suggests.

Gibby passes her the gun—with the barrel pointing at her, which Jade *hates*, but she takes it quickly, and lets Gibby have the dog bone.

Gibby stares at it curiously. He hesitates. And then he flings it as hard as he can.

Out of the darkness, a wolf sprints and leaps up into the air to catch it. About half the wolves move for it, the other half keep their eyes on Gibby. At least one wolf releases a warning growl as the wolf who caught the bone—who Jade sees when he moves into the light is Spencer—and brings it back to Gibby.

Gibby flinches at the sight of the huge, silvery wolf. “That’s Spencer,” Freddie informs him.

“Spencer?” Gibby asks. As if in answer, Spencer drops the bone and pants happily, wagging his tail.

“Throw it again,” Jade suggests.

And Gibby does.

Meanwhile, Jade has passed the gun off to Freddie, who apparently doesn’t know what to do with it, and it changes hands at least a few more times before it ends up with Sinjin, who says

he can unload it. But when he goes to do it, he looks up, awed. Somehow, Jade knows what he's going to say just as he says it, probably because it feels like a scene right out of a movie. "It's not loaded," Sinjin informs them.

"Not even a bullet in the chamber?" Andre asks.

Sinjin shakes his head. "Nothing."

Freddie turns back to Gibby. "Why are you really here?" he asks him directly.

"I told you. I thought you needed to be stopped."

"Stopped from *what*?"

"Hurting people."

"Then why wasn't your gun loaded?"

Gibby is silent for a long time. Finally, he says, "Because even though I thought you all didn't care about me, I still cared about you. I didn't want to *hurt* anyone."

"We care about you, too, Gibby," Freddie assures him.

"You sure had a funny way of showing it."

"Then let's start over," Freddie suggests. "What have you been up to?"

And Jade half-listens as Gibby describes going to community college after high school to get an associate's degree in business and how he mostly was just there to date around. How he got a lot of play—Jade assumes he must be exaggerating some here, but Freddie appears to take these claims at face value. Gibby says he didn't know what he wanted to do with his life, but he knew he wanted money, and that he's bounced around since graduating because business, it turns out, "is pretty boring."

"Where are you living?" Freddie asks him.

Gibby shrugs, "I don't know, man. I was living with my parents still, but it sucks."

Freddie glances around the group, but he doesn't actually ask anyone before he makes the offer, "Why don't you stay here with us?"

There's a loud barking growl from one of the wolves at this. Jade is pretty sure it's the same wolf who keeps growling when Spencer brings Gibby back the dog toy. She suspects it's Sam. Gibby glances at the sound in alarm, then replies, "Nah, I couldn't."

Freddie, though, is not intimidated by Sam's growls in the least. "You definitely could," he informs Gibby. "We have plenty of room. Maybe it'll be good for you to have a fresh start. Among friends."

Gibby stares at him for a long time. "Friends?"

“Of course,” Freddie assures him. “You’d just have to promise, you know, not to talk about werewolves, and not to try to kill any of us again.” He laughs nervously.

“So like,” Gibby begins, “I get to be in your cult.”

“Man, there *is* no cult!” Andre says in exasperation.

“But we could *make* one,” Gibby suggests.

“Only if Jade is in charge,” Cat says with a grin.

“Jade?” Gibby asks.

“Me.” Jade addresses Gibby. “Why do you want a cult? Do you want to *serve* me?”

He gazes at her, wide-eyed, as if taking her in for the first time. “Absolutely. I’d do anything you asked,” he answers with full sincerity.

Another growl from the werewolves still standing alert around the perimeter. But it’s a different wolf this time. Jade smirks as she realizes it’s probably Tori. “He can stay,” she decides. But she doesn’t want him to get the wrong impression. “But you should know, I’m *very* much taken by someone who *could* probably rip your throat out.” But, then she doesn’t want to push Gibby back the *other* way. “But she won’t.”

“You’re with a *chick*?” Gibby asks in surprise, then nods approvingly. “Hot.”

“Okay,” Freddie grimaces. “That’s another thing we’ll have to talk about if you’re going to stay here...”

He walks away with Gibby and Jade can hear him awkwardly start explaining about how almost everyone here is queer, “—Except a few people like my girlfriend, but my boyfriend obviously is—” and she laughs and shakes her head.

She looks over at Cat. “Well?” she asks.

Cat shivers. “That was scary.”

“I know,” Jade agrees, with relish. She finds Tori, who still watches Gibby uncertainly, and leans down to scratch behind her ears. “I have to go write,” she tells her. “Give me a bark when you’re ready to be let in.” Inspiration waits for no one, and Jade isn’t going to let the memory of the flashes of fear she experienced tonight go to waste.

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With Freddie’s unilateral decision to let Gibby stay with them at Moonflower Meadows (Cat is particularly proud of the name she came up with, even if there aren’t any moonflowers growing or even any meadows on the property) comes the first real conflict the group has faced all together. Which, Cat kind of figured this would happen eventually; trying to live with Sam and Carly when they really didn’t have enough space had taught her that affection and love can’t overcome conflict.

The night that Gibby shows up, Freddie takes him away to find a place to sleep, and Cat hears Beck murmur, “I think we should’ve talked about this.”

“Yeah, probably,” Andre agrees, though he doesn’t seem all that concerned about it.

The rest of that night, Sam sticks by Cat’s side, though she seems to constantly be watching Carly and Melanie. She barely seems to be enjoying herself, with the way she stands guard all evening, fur bristling. Even when it’s time to go to bed, Sam curls up at the foot of the bed, facing the cabin door, still seeming reluctant to relax.

The next afternoon when everyone is home (even Dice, who’s staying at the camp at least through the full moon), they call a meeting in the community building before the sun goes down.

The first problem seems to be that Gibby is attending. Sam scowls, “Wait, why is he here?” she asks.

“He lives here?” Freddie replies.

“Well, considering this meeting is about whether he even *should* live here—” Sam starts.

“Wait, you guys are kicking me out?” Gibby asks, sounding hurt and panicked.

“Nothing’s been decided yet,” Andre says patiently.

“We just want to talk this through,” Beck adds.

“What is there to talk about?” Carly asks. “We have plenty of space.”

“What is there—are you serious?” Sam addresses her. “Is everyone here forgetting that Gibby showed up last night wanting to *kill* us all?” Sam asks the group, very loudly.

“I wasn’t *really* going to hurt anybody!” Gibby protests.

Sam stands up so fast she knocks her chair over. “You came into *my* house and threatened *my* family and I’m supposed to just *accept* that you were lonely and everything is fine now? I’m sorry, but I’m not buying it!” Sam growls at him.

“I knew you never liked me!” Gibby shouts back, starting to stand himself.

“Guys!” Tori yells. “Hang on, this isn’t productive.”

“What’s not *productive* is—” Sam starts.

“Sam,” Tori and Carly warn in unison. Cat pats Sam’s leg soothingly, and she folds her arms and leans back, gesturing for Tori to speak.

“I think we should go around and everyone should have a chance to talk about how they feel about Gibby joining us,” Tori suggests.

“Great idea,” Jade drawls sarcastically. “I’ll go get a ‘talking stick’ from outside.”

“Thanks for the backup,” Tori sighs grouchyly.

“It’s a good idea,” Andre says supportively. “Um, why don’t you start?” he suggests to Tori.

But Jade must think he’d indicted her, because she says easily. “I really don’t care what happens here.”

Gibby looks wounded. “I thought you liked me.”

Tori side-eyes Gibby, then says, “I have to say, I understand Sam’s concerns.” Cat wonders if she’s actually just responding to Gibby’s obvious attraction to Jade.

Andre speaks next. “I really don’t have any problem with Gibby being here,” he begins. “But I do think we should’ve had a conversation before Freddie invited him.”

“I thought it was—” Freddie begins defensively.

“Wait your turn, Freddie,” Carly interrupts.

“Wait your turn, Freddie,” Freddie mocks in a low voice. Melanie elbows him with a frown.

Trina seems to realize she’s expected to speak next. “Oh, I don’t care either way what happens. But having another person around to split costs isn’t a bad thing.”

Sinjin is next. “I know what it’s like to feel like an outsider,” he begins. “I think offering Gibby a place is the right thing to do. It’s kind of the whole reason we’re here, you know?”

“I agree with Sinjin,” is all Burf says.

Beck seems torn. “I just really think there should’ve been more conversation. I don’t think we need to kick him out or anything, but maybe *at least* those of us who are paying for this place should’ve had more say—”

Sinjin seems to half nod at that, but Sam objects immediately, “It’s not *about* that—” She falls silent when Carly’s hand winds into her hair in warning.

Robbie adds, “I think future decisions should be more democratic. With *everyone* having a say.” He side-eyes both of his boyfriends a bit at this.

“I don’t have a problem at all with Gibby staying,” Melanie says, keeping it short and sweet.

Freddie takes a breath. “I invited Gibby because it was the right thing to do,” he says. “It helped to de-escalate the situation. Gibby came here because he felt lonely and lost. By welcoming him in, I’ve helped him find a place and a purpose.”

“I *really* want to stay here,” Gibby implores. “I’ve really missed you guys,” he looks around at Carly, Sam, and Spencer, “and I promise you won’t regret this.”



Spencer shrugs. "I'm fine with Gibby staying. He gives *great* massages."

"I have no objections," Goomer says, very formally, like he's in a courtroom.

Dice holds up his hands. "Hey, I don't even officially live here yet. But if I'm welcome here, maybe he should be too?"

"I've already said I'm in favor of him staying," Carly states. "I've known Gibby for years. He's harmless."

"Okay." Sam takes a breath. "First of all, I disagree with Beck that only those of us on the mortgage should make the call. We all have a stake in this place, and we've all agreed how to handle finances until everyone starts catching up, career-wise." Cat can't help but smile. Sometimes, it's easy to forget that Sam can be such a smooth talker, but there's a reason she's so good at making money selling things with Dice. For his part, Beck shrugs, his mouth thin, but doesn't offer any kind of argument. "Second of all, I think you all are *way* too soft on this situation. Yeah, it's great to offer a place for someone who needs it. But don't forget, we wanted a place like this for *werewolves*." She gestures at Dice. "Dice is here because he's a young werewolf with nowhere else to go to feel free. Gibby is a grown-ass human man who's tired of living at home. Who, let's not forget, threatened to *kill* us and break apart our camp!"

"Because I didn't understand!" Gibby protests.

"I don't have *nowhere* else to go," Dice mutters, seeming slightly offended.

"But most of us aren't werew—" Beck starts, then he pauses, looking around the circle. "Oh."

"Wait, how many of you are werewolves?" Gibby asks, interested. Cat would've thought it would be obvious based on who wasn't around the campfire the night before, but apparently not.

"There are nine of us," Carly answers him evenly.

"And a half," Sinjin adds, pointing at Burf.

Sam rolls her eyes, but doesn't object to Burf's designation. "So this is a space *mostly* for wolves. And their loved ones."

"Well...what if *I* love Gibby?" Carly challenges.

"And me!" Spencer adds.

Gibby grins and winks at Carly, then turns an appraising eye to Spencer. "Don't get me wrong, you're a good-looking man, but I think you're a little old for me."

"*Ouch*," Spencer clutches his chest. "I don't love Gibby anymore," he informs the group.

"I just don't see how we can trust him," Sam insists.

Gibby looks pained. “What can I do to make you see that I’m not going to hurt anyone? I *want* to be here!”

“Maybe start with giving *one good reason* why you want to stay?” Sam challenges.

“Wait a minute,” Tori interrupts. “One of us still hasn’t had a chance to speak.” She looks past Jade to Cat. “Cat? How do you feel?”

The truth is, Cat doesn’t know how she feels. The experience of watching Sam be *so* protective and concerned last night is visceral, though Cat herself hadn’t felt she was in any danger after they’d taken Gibby’s gun and realized it wasn’t loaded. But she also thinks it’s a wonderful idea to open their home to someone who seems like he could really use community and, as Freddie put it, a fresh start. And it’s certainly different because it’s someone who has a pre-existing tie to the group. Cat’s girlfriends have known Gibby since middle school. If some stranger Beck met at a bar, or even someone he’d been working with who he’d known less than a year, wanted to move in, Cat probably wouldn’t feel safe, even if that person *was* a werewolf. Actually, maybe *especially* if they were. But if, say, Jade’s brother needed a place to live to be away from their dad, Cat would be okay with that.

But no one is suggesting opening their home to *everyone*. That would be silly.

“I can understand why Sam doesn’t like this situation. Gibby *did* show up angry, and I really thought he meant us harm,” Cat starts. Beside her, Sam nods her head vigorously. “But I also know why Freddie invited him here. He used to be friends with you guys. You can trust each other again.” She hesitates. “I like the idea of being able to be a place for people we love to come and be safe and welcome. But I think we have to have limits. Not that...*no one* else should ever be welcome. But the more of us there are, the harder it’s going to be to organize things, to agree on things, to work things out.”

“That’s a fair point,” Andre comments, seeming to consider this.

“I guess,” Cat continues. “We should all be here because we *love* each other. We don’t all *have* to *individually* love each and every other person here,” she says, mostly at Sam, before she can protest (though she also has her eye on Jade). “But we’re...we’re like a family. Some of us *are* related by blood. Some of us have known each other for almost ten years, or longer. Some of us are newer friends, brought in because they’re close with only a few of us, almost like in-laws, I guess? But we all have to care about each other. Or this isn’t going to work.”

Beck nods slowly. “You make a lot of sense,” he tells her.

“Hey, well I care about you guys!” Gibby says confidently. “At least, those of you I know. And the scary one.” He points at Jade, who presses her lip together to avoid smirking while Tori glares.

“We care about you, too, Gibby,” Carly assures him.

Sam is gnawing her lip, still crossing her arms. Cat addresses Sam, “What would make you feel comfortable with this? Because we’re not kicking Gibby out. That’s decided.”

Sam sighs and her shoulders slump. “It’s not that I *don’t* care about Gibby,” she states reluctantly. “I just think that we need to take threats seriously in the future. No matter who they come from.”

“I think we can agree on that,” Freddie tells her. Sam still shoots him a glare.

“What else?” Cat presses.

“I guess I’m just not convinced he’s going to want to *stay*,” Sam states. “Because, like Cat said, we all have strong ties here now, and Gibby...we haven’t been close in a while.”

“Then give him a chance to get close again,” Freddie suggests.

“But then it’s a problem if he *does* leave, and knows us all so much better.”

“Hey, I won’t tell a soul,” Gibby promises. “I knew about you and Carly for years and never said anything.”

It’s a fair point. Even Sam seems to be swayed. “Fine. But I’m keeping my eye on you, Gibson.”

“I deserve it.” He grimaces.

“So, Gibby, you’re welcome here,” Freddie tells him. “But if you decide not to stay, there are no hard feelings. As long as you keep our secrets.”

“I *do* want to know how you found us, though,” Sam says suspiciously.

“Oh, that was easy,” Gibby replies, and starts talking about the things he’d found online, documents in public record, and what he’d discovered digging through their social media accounts, to try to figure out how many of them were living there. The only surprise had been Dice, whose name obviously wasn’t on any of the official documents and whose closeness hadn’t been apparent on social media, because, as Gibby states, “His account is the *most* professional one of all!”

As the month progresses, things begin to settle into place, as more of them start finding work, as more of their cabins start to come together. The issue of decorating had come up again when they’d moved in with Carly for the second time, but now that Carly has her own workspace, which is also the *iCarly* studio, it seems to have settled something with her.

“The thing is,” Carly tells her, while they’re sitting together on Sam and Cat’s same old couch from the set of *That’s a Drag*, “that maybe I don’t really *have* an aesthetic.”

“But you do!” Cat insists.

“I mean, sure, everybody does,” Carly amends. “But it isn’t quite as...*strong* as yours and Sam’s. My aesthetic is...I mean, the *iCarly* studio sums it up. But even that is less about what it *looks* like and more about what it *means* to me. Does that make sense?”

“Sure,” Cat agrees. “But that’s kind of how it works. It’s self-expression.”

“Right,” Carly agrees. “But the thing is, when I was young, I didn’t always get to pick how my room or anything looked. And I was fine with that. I loved my bedroom because Spencer and my friends designed it for me. I loved the *iCarly* studio because it was a group effort. I loved the rest of my apartment because it reminded me of how strange and special my brother was, and how lucky I was to have him. And here?” Carly gestures around. “I’m happy to supply a few things that I like. The Bigfoot crossing sign, the Firenze tourist poster, other cool stuff I’ve found. But I’m happy to be in this space because I love you and Sam, and it will remind me of you.”

“Are you *sure*?” Cat asks, remembering how much of a point of contention it seemed to be last time they’d lived together, and Carly had felt like she didn’t belong.

“I’m sure,” Carly nods. “I’ve realized that my self-expression takes *different* forms. I don’t tend to decorate my spaces because I’m not good at it. But you two are. And I’ll just be happy if my things can be incorporated in, without having to feel like I have to be *equally* represented.”

Of course, when they communicate this to Sam after she gets home from working with Dice, all she says to Carly is, “Well, I could’ve told you *that*.”

Cat’s birthday is at the end of the month, and to celebrate, she invites Nona out to see her new home. Honestly, the biggest drawback to moving to Moonflower Meadows has been moving further away from Nona. But Cat’s grandmother is still in good health, still loving life at Elderly Acres, and Cat is willing to make the effort to keep visiting Nona regularly (and Carly is often thrilled to accompany her, and sometimes, so is Sam, if dinner is part of the plan).

But today, Cat drives out to get Nona to bring her to the camp. Nona expresses some worry about how far away they are from everything, but Cat explains that they’re actually pretty close to a town (“just over the ridge over there”), and besides, it doesn’t take long at all to reach the LA metro area.

“Well, as long as you’re happy, I guess,” Nona says skeptically.

Cat shows Nona the cabin she shares with Sam and Carly. It hadn’t really occurred to her until her grandmother was in the space that there’s *only* the big king bed, and the rest of their double-sized cabin isn’t laid out as separate bedrooms. But Cat just continues gamely on, showing Nona the rooms, pointing out features and pieces of furniture she likes. Nona is a bit quiet as she takes it all in, but she remarks on things she likes, on things she recognizes, like an old end table of hers that Cat has kept, or a picture of the two of them in a frame on Cat’s dresser. Cat gives her a general tour of the rest of the camp before they head up to the community building.

In the kitchen, Cat, Carly, and Nona cook together, putting together one of Cat’s favorites of her Nona’s recipes. Nona marvels at the huge kitchen—which includes all the old appliances and even some cookware the previous owners simply included with the purchase. They have a wonderful time, and on her birthday, even Nona’s more rambling stories feel special.

They eat dinner as a group, with Nona sitting among them, and Cat feels so happy to be celebrated by so many people she loves. Robbie gets a sheet cake from Wanko's Warehouse with Mr. Purple printed on it, they pop some champagne, and Cat opens gifts. It's wonderful. It's not even a milestone birthday, but it's her best birthday yet.

The party winds down and they all head back to their cabins to sleep. Nona will be staying in one of the cabins they've furnished for guests, and Cat walks with her to her cabin to make sure she gets there safely. It can be a little dark out there when the moon isn't out, like tonight.

"I'm so glad you were able to come here for my birthday," Cat tells Nona.

"Well, I'm glad I finally got to see where you were living!" Nona replies. "I suppose it's a bit unconventional, but not unheard of. That sister of your mom's, what was her name?"

"My aunt Pearl?" Cat asks, shuddering slightly at the mention of her most hated relative.

"That's right. I know she lived on a commune once, before she settled down."

"I hope this is *nothing* like her commune," Cat remarks.

"Well, it makes you happy, and that's all that matters."

"It does," Cat tells her. "I'm really happy, Nona."

"You have some really wonderful friends," Nona comments. "I'm just happy you have people to support you, even beyond Sam and Carly."

The way she says it, Cat knows that Nona...knows. That she doesn't have to explain anything to her grandmother. She wouldn't anticipate her Nona having an issue with her being queer, because of her uncle and uncle in San Francisco, but her having *two* partners? That much she had never addressed with Nona, because she didn't even know how to begin.

But she doesn't have to. Nona understands. And Nona doesn't push her to explain anything.

"They're more than my friends," Cat comments, meaning all of them, everyone she lives with, everyone who was here tonight to celebrate her birthday. "They're my family."

Nona nods, though her smile is a little sad. "When you're a child, you don't get to choose your family," she states slowly. "As adults, we have the luxury of doing exactly that."

"I hope that doesn't hurt your feelings," Cat says quietly. "You're my family, too. As much as they are. It's just..." she trails off, thinking of her parents, who she rarely sees, her brother, who she misses terribly, because, as he gets treated like he's still a child, he doesn't get to choose his own family.

But Nona simply touches her shoulder affectionately. "I understand," she assures Cat.

Cat hugs her, and feels lucky, and immensely loved.

## July 2017

It turns out Gibby fits in quite well once they all get used to him. Even Sam seems to settle down quickly enough after she and Sinjin have a chance to sit down with Gibby to figure out ways to make their camp more secure, based on the way Gibby successfully tracked them down. It's a good idea; as isolated and safe as they all felt being tucked away in the mountains, it's true enough that they're close to the city, and, as Gibby proved, too easy to find. And with Beck's modicum of fame, and the fact that many of them are planning to work in ways that will potentially make them household names down the line, it's probably for the best that they learned this lesson so early on.

But the real test of friendship between Sam and Gibby seems to be something more personal. Tori hears when Sam asks him in an eager voice, "Do you still have your head?"

"Um," Gibby replies aggressively, "does a cow say moo?"

Sam seems to consider this answer. "I don't know, do they really sound like that?"

Gibby falters, too. "Actually, I have no idea."

And then, they laugh. And after that, Sam seems fine. She stops standing between Gibby and Cat, or Carly, or Melanie, as if constantly on the alert for a random attack. Sometimes, she'd even place herself between Gibby and Tori, which Tori had appreciated the care shown by the gesture, but it had struck her as highly unnecessary. She has her *own* scary girlfriend whose glare is often enough protection on its own.

Though, the dynamic between Gibby and Jade is another problem entirely.

Tori expresses her concern to Jade about Gibby one day after Gibby goes to buy a coffee for Jade, and presents it to her with a deep, reverent bow. "Should I be worried about what's going on here?" Tori asks guardedly.

Jade laughs, then keeps laughing, for what feels like an hour, making Tori feel embarrassed and annoyed. She folds her arms and grumbles as Jade tries to get control of herself. "Sorry," Jade eventually apologizes. "But you *so* don't have anything to worry about with him."

"Well, I didn't really think so," Tori mumbles defensively. "It's just that...he's so *obviously* into you."

"And I so *obviously* go home to you," Jade reminds her. She shrugs. "It's flattering. And, you know, I kind of missed having someone around who's a little bit *afraid* of me. That doesn't happen anymore."

"I could act afraid of you, if you want," Tori suggests coyly.

Jade laughs again. "Please, you're not *nearly* enough of a bottom for that." She turns pensive. "Except maybe on the new moon."

“I’ll mark my calendar,” Tori promises in a sultry tone.

Jade chuckles and pulls Tori close. “Honestly, I don’t even think he likes me like that anymore. I scare him too much. But the way he treats your sister, on the other hand...”

“Yeah, that’s a good point.” Gibby’s attraction to Trina has been even *more* obvious, which both she and Andre seem to take in stride. But instead of simply doing her bidding, like he does with Jade, Gibby showers her with compliments.

“Maybe Andre better watch out. There’s another guy in town who can actually *stand* Trina,” Jade smirks.

“Except Trina can’t stand Gibby.” Though, she *does* seem flattered sometimes...

Jade smiles. “Isn’t that how you and I started?”

For the next hour, they spend some time in bed reminding each other not of how things started, but of exactly how well things are going.

At the beginning of the month, Gibby officially decides that he’s staying at Moonflower Meadows (okay, the alliterative name is cute, Tori will give Sam and Cat that). He and Spencer (as someone who is *not* particularly waiting to hear from job interviewers or agents) go up to Seattle to pack up Gibby’s things to take down to LA, officially moving him out of his parents’ house. When he comes back, they have a welcome home party. Because why not? They all live close, it’s summer time, a lot of them are still in flux, with free time, finding their feet in new careers. It’s going to be a month full of parties, Tori knows that much. Carly and Jade both have birthdays at the end of July, only a few days apart. It’s going to be great. Tori can’t wait to celebrate two of her favorite people.

Really, though, she’s surrounded by her favorite people, and it feels like a dream.

As they all grow more settled, they begin falling into their own routines. Beck has started filming his movie, which is luckily a local shoot, so he can come home most nights (except for some future locations in which they’ll be shooting a couple hours out of the city). Tori has been doing a lot of self-tapes for auditions, which Jade sometimes helps her shoot, reasoning that it’ll be easier for Tori if she just handles the camera part and makes sure everything looks good, and has been attending callbacks in the city. Trina has been granted the opportunity to direct a one-act play in a series of a handful of shorts her theater company is putting on.

For their part, Robbie, Freddie, and Melanie all had a few job interviews in their scientific fields that went well and are waiting for acceptance calls and weighing which jobs they want most. Robbie hasn’t given up on comedy, though, and continues to go perform in venues where he can, but he figures having a day job will just offer him new material for his act.

Sinjin and Burf have been working for a while (Tori had realized recently she didn’t know what Burf even did and found out he works on visual effects in film), and Andre recently got a job at RPX Records, due in part to the fact that he spent time there as an intern in high school. Jade has been shaping which of her projects she wants to pitch to various people, something Beck keeps assuring her he can help with, in terms of making connections.

Actually, Beck has been offering a lot of that sort of help to everyone who works in the industry, including Carly, who has been looking for entry-level work in the industry as she explores ways to expand *iCarly* as a digital media enterprise, and Cat, who Tori thinks would be a huge asset to any costume department who wants her. And he's already helped Tori by getting her connected with a good agent, who is confident that Tori will be landing her first official role out of college soon.

Of course, in addition to Beck, Goomer, Sam, Spencer, and Dice all have established careers (though Spencer would probably say that "career" is a strong word for his sculptures, and Sam would probably shudder at the notion of even having such a thing). But even Gibby has been looking for work, using his business degree to try to land management jobs at established companies. "Management is easy," he claims. "You just tell people to do stuff." Well, Tori's no expert, but she'll take his word for it.

In short, things are looking up for everybody.

And even beyond the traditional career end of things, it's easy to feel inspired in a place like this, with fresh air and visible stars and so many trees. When they're not working, or trying to find work, they're still creating. Almost all of them have been in an *iCarly* sketch, have helped Spencer put together a large sculpture, have tried on clothes Cat makes, have listened to Andre's tracks and offered critiques, have worked out with Goomer. Jade is planning to shoot a short film around the time of her birthday, as a present to herself, and has wrangled almost everyone to be her cast and crew, and Trina, in turn, wants to put on a play at the amphitheater and have Jade and Freddie film it. As Sam has wryly observed, "You can take the nerds out of the theater, but you can't take the theater out of the nerds."

It can't even be offensive when it's simply true.

The full moon falls as Gibby has had just enough time to bring his belongings back from Seattle and start really making his cabin his own. After he'd arrived last month, they'd collectively spent the last two nights of the full moon either taking wolfsbane or changing in the privacy of their cabins, still wary of Gibby's reaction, but in the time he's spent here so far, he's gained everyone's trust. And he's almost as excited for a wolf night as anyone else.

"So it's just, like, having a bunch of dogs running around! But smarter dogs!" Gibby says enthusiastically.

Andre moves his head back and forth, assessing this. "Yeah, that's about the extent of it," he agrees.

"But they definitely don't like it when you say that," Cat adds. "Even though it's true," she adds in a stage whisper.

"Wait'll they see what I got at the pet store!" Gibby crows.

Okay. Tori's excited.

In her cabin with Jade, she's stripping down and preparing to change. Last month, Jade had been in the other room to give her space, but this month, neither of them seem to care that



much, about Jade watching Tori transform.

As she disrobes, Tori remembers the first time Jade watched her change, how it had felt like the most intimate thing she'd ever done with another person up until then (and they'd even had orgasms together at that point, but *still*). *So much* has changed since then, but Jade has always been by her side. Her constant. Her north star. Or... West star?

Tori's chuckling at the thought. Jade narrows her eyes. "What?" she asks.

"Nothing. Just thinking about when we were young."

Jade snorts. "Because we're *so* ancient now."

"Yep," Tori replies. "I'm an old crone. I can't believe you're still attracted to me."

Jade rolls her eyes, but she's smiling. "I kind of can't believe *you* were my queer awakening."

The nostalgia is clearly getting to them both. Tori thinks about the moment she knew something real might be possible with Jade, when Jade told her that she'd changed the ending of her infamous "gay play" to make it more optimistic, because she'd felt happy with Tori. She remembers Jade being certain that she'd probably never write another optimistic story again.

Well, that much is...probably true, actually. But maybe she doesn't need to, when they're *living* their own optimistic story together.

"Remember your gay play?" Tori asks abruptly.

Jade sighs deeply. "Yes, Tori. I'll literally never live it down."

"I was just remembering the way it brought us closer together."

Jade clearly can't help but smile a bit at this. "Yeah," she acknowledges.

"And here we are. Because I decided to tell you I'm a werewolf, and you wrote a gay play." Tori grins broadly, standing nude in front of her girlfriend now. "Isn't life funny?"

"A real knee-slapper," Jade drawls tonelessly. Her eyes rake over Tori's body in a brief but very obvious appreciation. But in a moment of rare sincerity, she adds, "I'm glad you stuck by me all these years."

"Well, you make it easy." When Jade shoots her a highly skeptical look, Tori adds, "By being incredibly hot and having giant boobs."

Jade laughs. "It's good to know you appreciate me for *me*."

Tori glances toward the cabin window. "Almost time," she reports.

Jade grins and sits down to watch. Tori closes her eyes, and within a minute or so, she's a wolf, gazing up at Jade, tail wagging. "It kills me to know that you guys transforming is a

practical effect we could absolutely never use on film,” Jade sighs. But she scratches the fur at Tori’s neck affectionately. “Ready to go outside and play?” she asks.

Tori barks eagerly. Jade goes to the cabin door and pretends to open it several times, making Tori lunge futilely, until Tori tries to jump up on her in retaliation, and Jade laughs, letting her outside.

The summer night is warm. The stars are only obscured by the light of the moon in the cloudless sky. The grass is soft beneath her feet, the air smells of pine and sagebrush and woodsmoke, and the barks of her friends set her sprinting toward the amphitheater, where the bonfire is bright, and the people she loves are gathered.

Tori can’t help it. She howls at the sky in pure delight, spurring the other wolves to follow her lead, and a chorus of voices fill the air. Like a song, like a performance, but for no purpose other than love.

The future is as bright as the moon that guides her. Tori is truly home with her pack, and especially, with the love of her life, who grins at the spectacle of wolves in front of her, her blue eyes full of dreams and inspiration.

Optimism looks good on Jade.

## End Notes

Title from Purity Ring, “nthngsfine”

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